

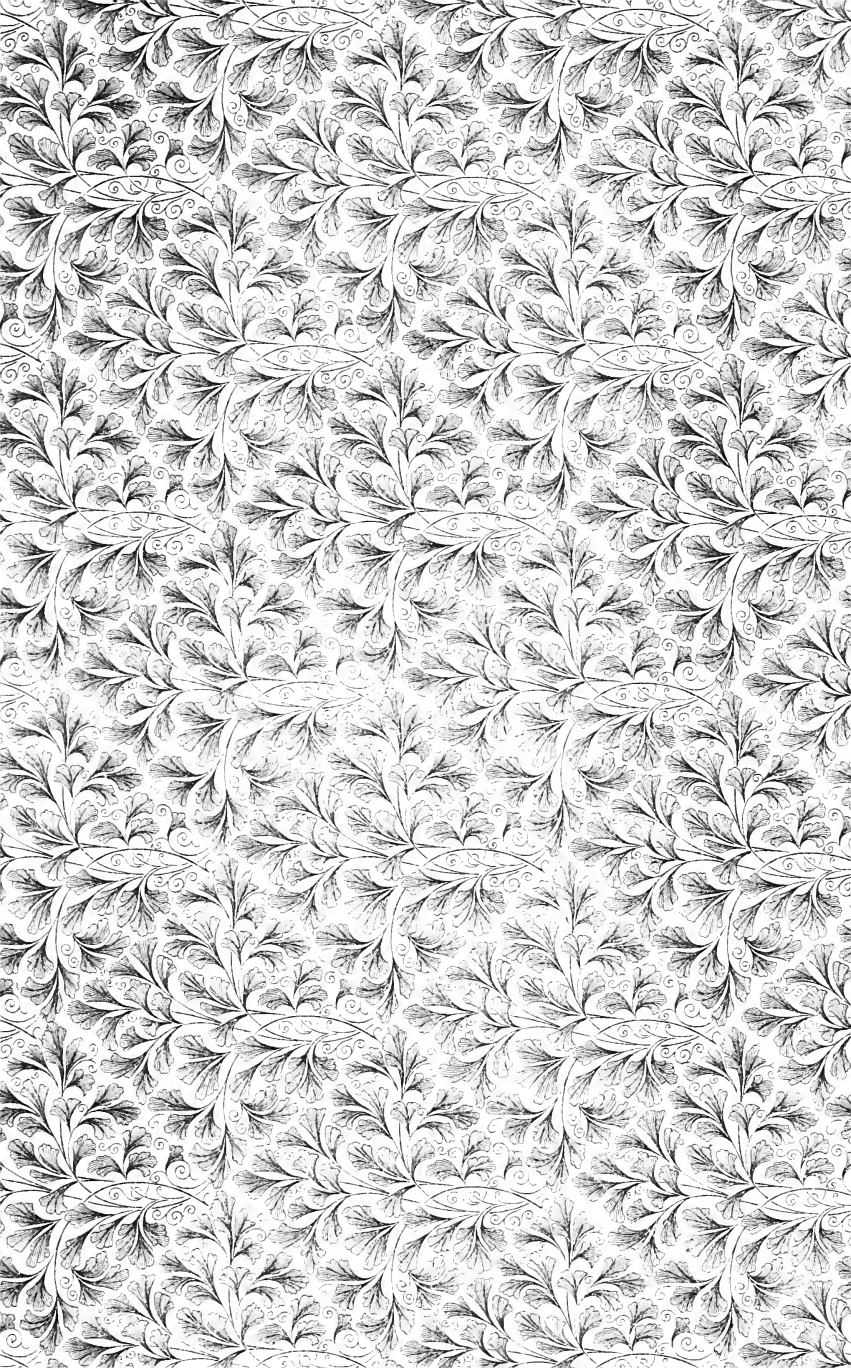
LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS

823

N47b1

1895a

v.2





BILLY BELLEW

NEW LIBRARY NOVELS.

- THE CONVICT SHIP. By W. CLARK RUSSELL. 3 vols.
THE TREMLETT DIAMONDS. By ALAN ST. AUBYN. 2 vols.
THE THREE GRACES. By Mrs. HUNGERFORD. 2 vols.
THE DRIFT OF FATE. By DORA RUSSELL. 3 vols.
BEYOND THE DREAMS OF AVARICE. By WALTER BESANT. 1 vol.
IN DEACON'S ORDERS. By WALTER BESANT. 1 vol.
HONOUR OF THIEVES. By C. J. CUTCLIFFE HYNE. 1 vol.
RHODA ROBERTS. By HARRY LINDSAY. 1 vol.
THE MACDONALD LASS. By SARAH TYTLER. 1 vol.
THE MINOR CHORD. By J. MITCHELL CHAPPLE. 1 vol.
VILLAGE TALES AND JUNGLE TRAGEDIES. By B. M. CROKER. 1 vol.
MADAME SANS-GÊNE. By E. LEPELLETIER. 1 vol.
MOUNT DESPAIR. By D. CHRISTIE MURRAY. 1 vol.
THE PHANTOM DEATH. By W. CLARK RUSSELL. 1 vol.
THE PRINCE OF BALKISTAN. By ALLEN UPWARD. 1 vol.

LONDON: CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY.

BILLY BELLEW

BY

W. E. NORRIS

AUTHOR OF 'THE ROGUE,' 'SAINT ANNS,' ETC.



IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II.

London

CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1895

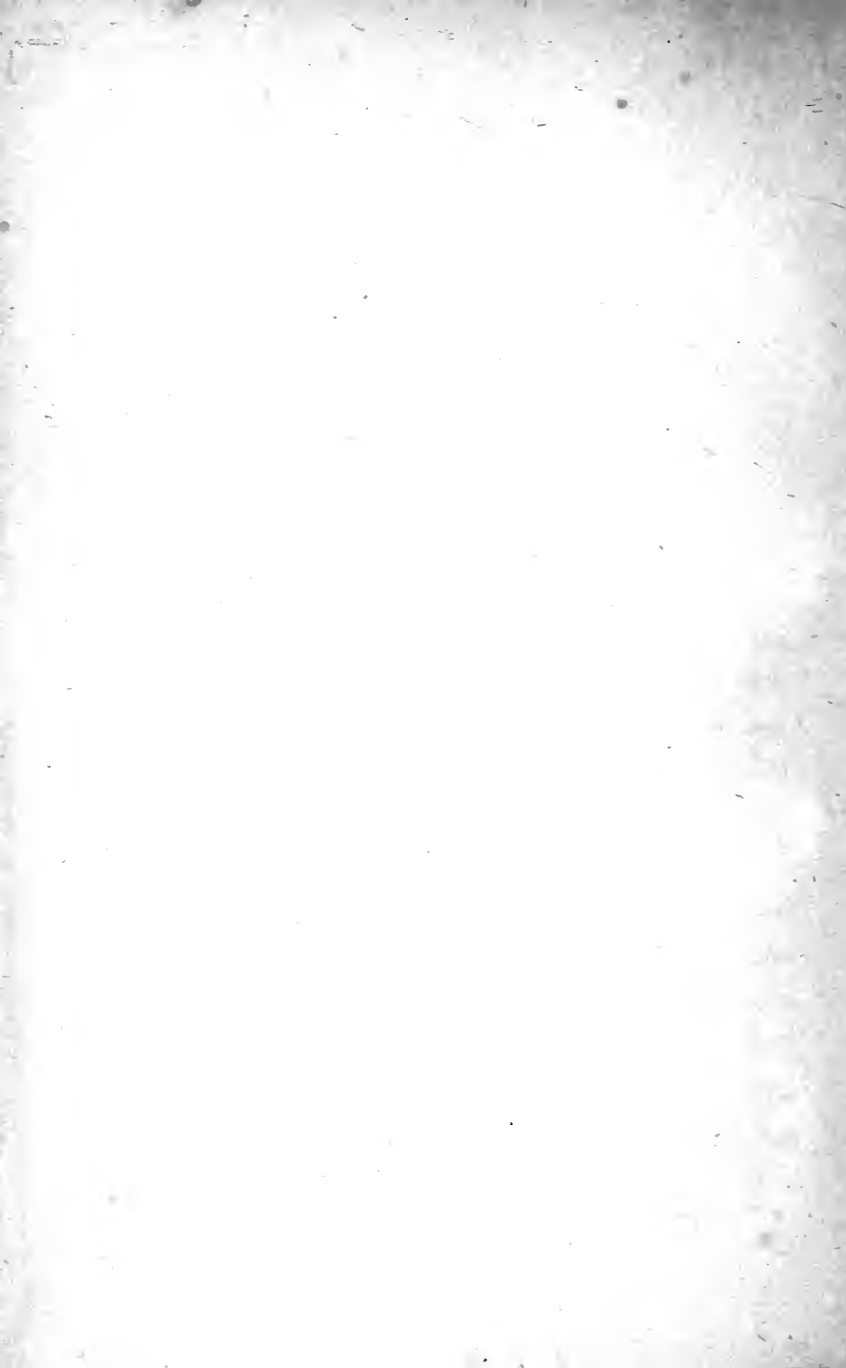
Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

<http://www.archive.org/details/billybellew02norr>

823
N47bi
1895a
v. 2

CONTENTS OF VOL. II.

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIII. DAISY ACTS FROM THE HIGHEST MOTIVES -	I
XIV. THE CHEMIN DES AQUEDUCS - - -	19
XV. BILLY TAKES LEAVE - - -	39
XVI. BILLY HANDS IN HIS RESIGNATION - -	59
XVII. EDMUND KIRBY'S HOLIDAY - - -	78
XVIII. BILLY GETS HIS COMPASS BACK - -	99
XIX. DAISY'S RECOVERY - - -	118
XX. THE UNWELCOME GUEST - - -	137
XXI. CHANGES - - -	154
XXII. A FULL CONFESSION - - -	174
XXIII. THE MINISTERING ANGEL - - -	192
XXIV. BILLY MAKES HIS ESCAPE - - -	219



BILLY BELLEW

CHAPTER XIII.

DAISY ACTS FROM THE HIGHEST MOTIVES.

THE climate of Algiers seemed determined that year to justify all that has been said and written in its praise by its warmest partisans, and to prove that the grumblers, who are at least equally numerous, have dwelt with too much severity upon its occasional aberrations. A heavy bank of clouds had been visible behind the Bouzaréah as the excursionists drove up the hill towards home ; but this ominous sign, which usually means a steady downpour of forty-eight hours, heralded nothing worse in the present instance than a storm during

the night and a few showers which passed away before morning, leaving the skies bluer and the trees greener than ever.

Winifred strolled out to the summer-house after her early breakfast, as her habit was, and filled her lungs with the delicious crisp air. There are days when and places in which the mere joy of being alive and in perfect health is, or ought to be, enough to satisfy anybody, and Winifred would have been very well contented with existence, had she not been rather worried by a few comparative trifles. For one thing, she was sorry that she had spoken so snappishly to poor Mr. Bellew on the previous evening. It was not her custom to speak snappishly, and, from what she had since seen and heard, she did not now believe that he had deserved to be so spoken to. Daisy had been very nice and pleasant to Harry Lysaght on the way home ; it had transpired incidentally that Mr. Bellew had been 'bothering and fussing' the whole afternoon about the absentees in the boat ; after all, it was no fault of his that he had been

made to spend several hours with a lady to whom he had intimated that he no longer meant to pay his addresses.

‘I wish I hadn’t been so rude to him!’ Winifred thought remorsefully; ‘but he did rather seem to be fishing for an invitation, and he ought to have known that I couldn’t give him one. Well, I suppose he won’t come here any more now—which is all the better, perhaps.’

Nevertheless, she sighed, for she had become fond of Billy, and she was very sorry for him. It was a fact that she had cried after that interview in which he had so submissively accepted her virtual prohibition of his visits, and possibly her tears may have been caused by sheer pity for his lot, which, in truth, was pitiable enough; but it is not certain that personal regret had nothing to do with them. Why must Daisy needs get up a flirtation with every man who came in her way? Why, if she intended to marry the man whom she really seemed to like better than anybody else, couldn’t she do so and leave the rest of the world

in peace? Next to a long engagement, nothing is so tiresome and fruitful in vexations of all kinds as a long courtship!

Although there was nobody to see her, Winifred blushed after she had formulated this last sentiment and glanced penitently at the unopened letter which she held in her hand. Was she tired of being engaged to her faithful Edmund? Of course she was not; she would as soon have thought of being tired of her father or her mother. Still, one may be very fond of a person and yet find his letters a little prosy. This one, which she now proceeded to read, was, if anything, prosier than usual. It was not enlivened by the record of any more family rows. Edmund had been too busy to go home again, and had heard no news from Shropshire, which, he said, he trusted might be taken as good news. He was getting on in his profession, and, by way of proving that he was, he favoured his correspondent with a brief synopsis of a case in which he had recently been engaged. This, though doubtless worded in the clearest

available phraseology, was wholly unintelligible to her. Then came a page and a half of observations upon current politics, which were more comprehensible, but, it is to be feared, not much too interesting to the recipient. Mr. Kirby was a moderate Liberal; he was the sort of man who could not very well be anything else, and his political views were not of a nature to arouse enthusiasm. He wound up by saying that he had perused Mr. Forbes's article in the *Modern Review* with very great interest and pleasure, and that he looked forward to meeting the talented writer again before long—'and you too,' he considerably added, as an afterthought.

Winifred knew that the man himself was a great deal better than his letters, that he was not in reality as formal and pedantic as they made him appear, and that, although he abstained from the use of ardent language, his affection for her was as strong and genuine as everything else about him; still, the fact remained that his letters chilled her. She was idly wondering whether Edmund would

like or would sternly condemn Mr. Bellew, when Micky came out with his lesson-books to give another turn to her thoughts.

Micky was not in one of his most docile moods that morning. There were three outrageous false quantities in the copy of Latin verses which he submitted to his instructress. He had brought a chameleon—his latest acquisition—out with him, and devoted a good deal more attention to the variation in the creature's hues than to the solution of the problem in Euclid with which he was invited to grapple. He said there was a volatility in the atmosphere which was distinctly hostile to the concentration of the faculties upon any one subject, and, on being asked what he meant by talking such nonsense, replied that it might be nonsense, and that he shouldn't wonder if it was, but that he had heard his revered father use those very words a quarter of an hour ago, anyhow.

Winifred refused to have her attention diverted from the matter in hand. She plodded patiently along, and her reluctant pupil plodded patiently

after her, until they arrived triumphantly at Q.E.F., whereupon Micky closed the book with a bang.

‘That’s capital,’ said he; ‘now we know all about it. I say, Winnie, I’ve got an idea in my head.’

‘Nobody who had been trying to teach you for the last half-hour would have thought so!’ remarked Winifred, laughing. ‘Well, what is your idea?’

‘Why, Harry Lysaght turned up just now, a good hour before his usual time, and he looked uncommonly like a man with a purpose. He asked for Daisy, and presently they’re going out for a walk together. Winnie, my love, it strikes me forcibly that the decisive moment has come.’

‘You don’t mean that!’ exclaimed Winifred involuntarily. ‘It’s no concern of yours or mine, though,’ she added at once; ‘and we really must get on with our lessons.’

‘Yes, in half a minute. I’m glad he has made up his mind to drive her into a corner at last, aren’t you? She’ll have to take him or leave him

this time, and I think my Daisy knows too well on which side her bread is buttered to leave him. I suppose he held a consultation with you when you were out in the boat with him yesterday, didn't he?

'My dear Micky, do you think that, if he had consulted me, I should be likely to talk about it to little boys?'

'My dear Winnie, I am very old for my age, and you might rely upon my discretion. But I don't particularly care to be told whether he consulted you or not, because I'm sure he did. Quite right, too; and it's lucky for him that he spent the day at sea. He wouldn't have enjoyed himself if he had been with us, and seen the way that Daisy carried on with Mr. Bellew.'

'Micky, you shouldn't try to be clever. You are always fancying that you see things and letting your imagination run away with you.'

'I am, am I? Well, there was nothing imaginary about Daisy's behaviour yesterday afternoon, at all events. I quite blushed for her! And she

was jolly well sold, after all; for Mr. Bellew was wishing her at Jericho, and wishing himself in Harry Lysaght's place the whole time. I'll allow,' added Micky impartially, 'that it takes a bit of imagination to discover that sort of thing; but I did discover it.'

His imagination was also equal to the surmise that the above statement would not be unwelcome to his elder sister, and he at once perceived from her face that it had pleased her. That, to be sure, did not exactly prove what he hoped that it proved; but he felt encouraged to expatiate further upon the subject, and was about to do so, when he was authoritatively ordered to stop chattering and resume his studies.

But not much more was accomplished in the way of study that morning. Winifred herself could not keep her mind from wandering, and she ended by dismissing her pupil somewhat earlier than the regulation hour. Long before that she had caught a glimpse of Daisy and her lover skirting the hillside together at a leisurely pace. Surely they must

have returned by now, and surely, if there were any good news to be told, Daisy would hasten to impart it to her. As far as that went, she would probably be the first to hear of any bad news ; for Daisy, like the rest of the family, instinctively turned to her in moments of difficulty or emergency.

However, it was not Daisy, but Harry Lysaght, who eventually crossed the garden with hurried steps in search of her, and as soon as she saw him, she understood that he was the bearer of evil tidings. Harry, who was rather red in the face, and seemed to be labouring under considerable agitation, said :

‘I’ve come to bid you good-bye. I shall leave by to-morrow’s steamer, if I can get a berth ; if I can’t, I shall have to go by train to Oran and sail from there. I must get out of this as soon as possible, anyhow.’

Winifred started to her feet in dismay. ‘Oh, I’m so very sorry!’ she exclaimed. ‘Is it really all over, then?’

‘It’s all over with me, if that’s what you mean,’

answered the young man rather roughly. 'Perhaps I ought to have expected as much, and perhaps I had no right to expect what I did ; but I must say that I don't think I have been fairly treated.'

'If Daisy has refused you, I don't think that you have,' assented Winifred sorrowfully ; 'but I can't believe that she intended to refuse you finally. Most likely it is a misunderstanding. You said something that made her angry, didn't you ? Sit down and tell me all about it.'

Harry did not sit down, but he said that, since she wanted to know, he could tell her all about it in a very few words. He had asked Daisy to marry him, and she had answered that she didn't care sufficiently for him to do so ; he supposed that was straight enough, wasn't it ?

Winifred had to admit that, in the case of most girls, it might be so considered ; but she reminded her hearer that Daisy was a little bit wilful and capricious. It wasn't wise, and he should have known that it wouldn't be wise, to approach her with a peremptory demand.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. 'An end must come to everything some time or other,' he remarked; 'you will hardly accuse me of headlong precipitation, I should hope! There was no misunderstanding and no anger; she simply said that she was very sorry, but that she found she didn't care enough for me to be my wife—so after that there wasn't much more to be said.'

'And did you say nothing more?'

'Oh, I was ass enough to say a good deal more; but I should have done better to hold my tongue. Well, it can't be helped, and I shouldn't dream of complaining to anybody except you, but to you I don't mind saying that I think she has treated me very badly. Certainly, before you left England, she gave me every excuse for expecting a different answer. Oh, I know things have happened since then—although you don't, or won't confess that you do. Of course she has a perfect right to prefer Bellew to me, and I have no doubt that nine women out of ten would; only—I *was* first in the field, you see.'

‘But I think—I hope you are mistaken about Mr. Bellew,’ said Winifred feebly.

‘No, my dear Winnie, I am not mistaken,’ answered Harry, with rather a dreary laugh. ‘I know when she is flirting with a man—I ought to know, having seen her do it so often!—and I know when she is in earnest, because I never saw her in earnest before. In point of fact I taxed her with it, and she scarcely denied it. Pretty poor form on my part, you’ll say; but, between ourselves, I don’t think either he or she has shown quite the best of good form in this business. Now I must be off. We shall meet again in the course of the summer, I suppose, and I shall try to look as if I didn’t mind. I couldn’t quite manage that at present, so—good-bye.’

Winifred gave him her hand. She felt that it would be useless to detain him any longer, and in the face of the statements he had made, she could hardly advise him to renew his suit, but she said she would have a talk with Daisy, and perhaps she would send him down a note in the afternoon.

‘Oh no, you won’t do that,’ returned Harry, shaking his head ; ‘if you send a note to the Hôtel d’Orient at all, it will be a note to Bellew asking him to come and dine. After all, why shouldn’t you? It’s impossible to make everybody happy, and you naturally think more of your sister’s happiness than of mine. You were a real friend to me while you could be, though, and I’m not ungrateful.’

After he had departed, Winnie went into the house, where she found the mid-day meal in progress, and received her father’s customary rebuke for unpunctuality. Mrs. Forbes had evidently been in tears, Daisy looked calm, cool and obstinate, and Micky made expressive grimaces from the other side of the table. Immediately upon the conclusion of the repast, Winifred was summoned to write letters for her father, so it was not until an hour later that she was able to obtain speech of Daisy, whom she found waiting for her in the garden, and who began :

‘For Heaven’s sake, don’t scold! I have had

such a scolding as never was from mamma, and I really can't stand any more. You must smooth her down, Winnie, and tell her it's all right; she won't listen to me.'

'But I don't think it *is* all right,' objected Winnie; 'it seems to me that it is all wrong. If you really don't care for poor Harry Lysaght——'

'Have I ever pretended that I cared for poor Harry Lysaght? Haven't I told you scores of times that I liked him very well, and that was all? You know as well as I do that mamma isn't weeping over the loss of Harry Lysaght, it's the loss of Harry Lysaght's property that goes to her heart. But let her cheer up; there are other men in the world who have property or money. And whatever mamma's views may be, I should have thought that *you* would wish me to marry a man whom I could love—even if he hadn't any landed property.'

Winifred remained silent for a few moments. Then she remarked:

'Harry thinks there is such a man.'

‘So he was kind enough to inform me. He is very welcome to his opinion.’

‘That is rather hard upon him, don’t you think?’

‘Upon whom? Harry, or the anonymous man?’

‘Well, upon both, perhaps,’ answered Winifred, laughing a little; ‘but of course I meant Harry. By the way, you didn’t allow the other man to remain anonymous, according to his account.’

‘It was he who mentioned Mr. Bellew’s name, not I. He said he was certain that I liked Mr. Bellew better than him, and I really couldn’t contradict him without telling a fib.’

Winifred looked grave.

‘Of course,’ she began, ‘I don’t know how far matters have gone——’

‘Oh, they haven’t gone very far yet,’ interrupted Daisy; ‘but I tell you frankly that I mean them to go a good deal farther before I have done with him. Now, Winnie, you needn’t put on a scandalised face, because you were warned from the first that it was my pious intention to rescue him from the clutches of Mrs. Littlewood. If you call that

being hard upon him, you must be blind to his true interests. Whether I shall marry him or not is another question.'

'I suppose,' remarked Winifred, 'it is just possible that he may not ask you?'

'Perfectly possible,' answered Daisy with a quiet smile, which implied that she did not deem such an omission on his part probable. 'As for Harry Lysaght,' she continued, 'I don't see that he has anything to grumble at; and I ought to be applauded, instead of abused, for having refused an indulgent husband and a charming house and lots of pin-money, from the highest motives. I say that for your benefit; you needn't pass it on to mamma; it wouldn't appeal to her. The way to comfort her is to dwell upon Mr. Bellew's wealth, which I hear is considerable.'

At this moment Mrs. Forbes's voice was heard plaintively calling Winnie from the window, and thus the colloquy came to an end.

Harry Lysaght received no note from Winnie that evening, but, on the other hand, Billy Bellew

did receive an invitation to dinner from Mrs. Forbes, who, like a wise, constitutional sovereign, had decided to submit with as good a grace as she could to the vagaries of one over whom her authority was but nominal.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CHEMIN DES AQUEDUCS.

OWING to a previous engagement, Mr. Bellew was unable to accept Mrs. Forbes's kind invitation to dinner ; and he might have added that it would be a waste of time to send him any more such invitations, because he was sure to be previously engaged during the remainder of his sojourn in Algiers. Fortunately, however, for his peace of mind, he did not know this, nor did Mrs. Littlewood upbraid him for his faithlessness. On the contrary, she took more pains than she had for a long time past done to make herself pleasant to him ; only she never missed an opportunity of saying something contemptuous about the elder Miss Forbes, and for about

ten days she held him very tight indeed. These, it must be acknowledged, were not clever tactics ; but Mrs. Littlewood was not a clever woman. She thought (but even clever women often fall into that error) that the ashes of a dead love may be fanned into life again ; she thought that Billy was a goose, and that the only way to deal with him was to keep him out of temptation's way ; furthermore, she was under the impression that she possessed sufficient influence over him to imbue him with her own views respecting other people.

For ten days, therefore, Billy was not allowed to see much of the Forbes family, although he had some rides with Micky in the early mornings ; but at the expiration of that time Mrs. Littlewood's vigilance began to relax. She had satisfied herself that her devoted attendant had at least not been guilty of the atrocity of proposing to Miss Forbes ; the meekness with which he listened to her hostile criticisms upon that lady helped to disarm suspicion ; she reflected that the notions which find their way into the head of a small boy should

not be taken too seriously ; moreover, she really had great difficulty in believing that any man with eyes in his head could have been fascinated by one so immeasurably her inferior in the matter of looks. Consequently she let him have a little more rope, thereby unconsciously rendering a service to Daisy, whose patience and forbearance had been subjected to a severe strain all this time.

Daisy, in default of other facilities for cultivating amicable relations with Mr. Bellew, had been driven to join occasionally in those matutinal rides. Much as she hated early rising, and little as she relished the company of an intrusive and obstinate third person, she felt that she had no alternative. So she asked in a very humble manner whether she might sometimes be permitted to go out with her brother and his friend, and the request was of course granted. Her manner had, for some reason or other, become humble ; she no longer attempted to domineer over Mr. Bellew, or to treat him as she was wont to treat her admirers ; she would ride beside him for long distances without once

opening her lips, and she accepted certain reprimands which he thought it right to administer to her upon her style of equitation with curious submissiveness. Billy thought her greatly improved, and began to like her much better than he had done. He had heard from Micky that she had rejected Harry Lysaght, and he suspected that she was already repenting of what she had done. But not for one moment did he suspect that he himself had had anything to do with that hasty and foolish rejection.

Of Winnie he obtained a glimpse, but only a glimpse, every now and then. It sometimes happened that she was in the garden or at the front door when he and his companions returned from their ride, and then she would say good-morning, or perhaps address a few words to him. Once he ventured to suggest that it would do her good to accompany them the next time they went out, but his proposal met with no encouragement.

‘Don’t you remember telling me,’ she asked, ‘that I was not fond of riding? You were quite

right ; I am not fond of it. Besides, I have so many other things to do.'

But although she would not ride with him, she did not seem to mind talking to him ; and he had more frequent occasions of exchanging ideas with her, after the reassured Mrs. Littlewood took to driving with her friend Mrs. Ryland, and leaving his afternoons free. What puzzled him a little was the half-compassionate, half-regretful look which he surprised every now and again in her brown eyes. Was she sorry for him because he was still in bondage, and because he refused to break his bonds ? He hoped it might be that, but he hardly thought it could be, for she never alluded even remotely to the subject. How, indeed, should he have guessed what she herself could not have explained ? According to her view of the situation, Mr. Bellew was not at all to be pitied. He was going to break with Mrs. Littlewood ; he had fallen in love with Daisy, who had obviously fallen in love (and for the very first time in her life) with him ; no difficulties would be raised by Mr. and

Mrs. Forbes, the latter of whom had made inquiries, and was prepared to give him a maternal welcome, now that Harry Lysaght was past praying for—no; Mr. Bellew could scarcely be called a fit subject for pity. Yet, somehow or other, she did pity him, and she regretted Daisy's perversity almost as much on his account as on Harry's. There may have been some dim, unformulated notion in her mind that he was too good for Daisy.

Meanwhile, the spring was advancing rapidly. The blossoms had fallen from the almond-trees; such of the aloes as proposed flowering prior to their demise were sending up long spikes; the sun was growing more powerful every day, the winter visitants were becoming restless. Amongst the other gifts bestowed by the bounteous season came Colonel Littlewood, back from Hammam R'irha with a clean bill of health, but an empty pocket. Baccarat had of late treated him most unkindly, he explained to Billy, and his bad luck at that seductive game rendered the negotiation of a fresh loan imperative. Of course he got his money, and

of course, in expressing his thanks, he gave utterance to the customary formula respecting ultimate repayment. Repayment was what Billy had never asked for and never anticipated; still, as he was not what in these days is accounted a rich man, it would have been convenient to him to see some of his money back. He more than suspected, too, that a further advance would be required in order to defray the expense of his friends' homeward journey. When would they go, he wondered; and would he be expected to go with them when they went? He put some tentative queries upon the subject to the Colonel, who answered, with his habitual complaisance:

'Oh, *I* don't know, my dear fellow; you must ask the wife. You and she had better settle it between you.'

No necessity for consulting Mrs. Littlewood arose, for that lady had already settled what she meant to do, and in the course of the same evening she made her intentions known to the somewhat dismayed Billy.

‘I think we have had about enough of this,’ she told him. ‘The people here haven’t been so civil to us that we need break our hearts at leaving them; and although I am sorry to tear you away from Le Bocage, I am afraid the time has come for me to issue marching-orders. It’s rather too soon to go straight back to London, though—how would Tunis and Sicily, and then a leisurely trip through Italy, suit you?’

Billy could not imagine anything much less likely to suit him than the above programme, but it was impossible to say so. What he did say, in hasty and guilty accents, was :

‘That would be very nice—very nice indeed! Only I’m not sure whether I oughtn’t to get home rather sooner than you will. I half promised to ride for a man at Sandown, and—and there are a lot of other things that I must see about. I was thinking that I might perhaps stay on here for a few days after you leave, and then travel straight through to England.’

The scene which he had as good as invited

promptly followed, and an unconditional surrender on his part followed the scene with equal promptitude. It is all very well to sneer at his weakness, but, under the circumstances, no amount of strength would have availed him much. He had to choose between surrender and quarrelling with Blanche, and he could not quarrel with Blanche; he would have considered himself a downright brute if he had done that. She gave him to understand that his behaviour in proposing to desert her amounted to something not very far short of downright brutality; she did not forgive him until she had made him beg repeatedly for forgiveness; and, by way of guarding against any possible relapse into insubordination, she despatched him to the town the next day to find out about steamers and to secure a passage to Tunis for himself, as well as for her and her husband.

A sorrowful man was he when he set forth on foot to obey her orders. It was true that the day of his departure would have had to come sooner or later, and that a prolongation of his sojourn in

Algiers would not have altered the fact that an insurmountable barrier existed between him and Winifred Forbes ; but most people prefer to take a necessary dose of pain later rather than sooner, while no man of Billy Bellew's age believes, at the bottom of his heart, in insurmountable barriers.

The office of the Compagnie Transatlantique was crowded, and he had an absurd sort of hope that cabins might not be obtainable that week ; but the short-mannered clerk behind the grating took his money and his order without hesitation, and presently pushed the tickets towards him. There is sometimes a difficulty about getting cabins for Marseilles at short notice ; but the coasting service is less largely patronized. Billy turned away with a heavy heart, and, making for the door, almost ran into the arms of Winifred Forbes.

‘I have come to take our passage,’ she said. ‘We are such a large party that we have to make our arrangements a week or two in advance. Are you here on the same errand ?’

Billy nodded gloomily. ‘Only I'm not taking

time so very much by the forelock,' he said. 'We're bound for Tunis, and we sail in three days, I'm sorry to say.'

No one could have misinterpreted the expression which Winifred's face assumed when she heard this announcement. She not only looked startled; she looked almost horrified.

'In three days?' she echoed. 'But surely this is a very sudden resolution, is it not?'

'Yes, I suppose it is rather sudden; but Mrs. Littlewood often does make up her mind in a hurry.'

'Ah—Mrs. Littlewood! You are going with her, then?'

Well, if he was, that was hardly a reason for her addressing him in accents of seeming reproach; she knew very well that he was compelled to do as Mrs. Littlewood told him. He made no reply, beyond a grunt, and then asked whether he could be of any use in taking her tickets for her, as a lady might have some trouble in elbowing her way through the throng. His offer was accepted, and

thus he ascertained that the Forbes were not going to leave Algiers for another month. Another month! Ah, if only some thrice-blessed Captain Patten could have been discovered to replace him, and if he could have remained quietly where he was for that length of time! But what is the good of sighing for impossibilities?

Winifred had recovered her equanimity when he rejoined her. She thanked him, and remarked: 'I suppose you are riding or driving? I am going to walk up the hill.'

How like that selfish old father of hers to have sent her all that distance on foot, and to have made her do his troublesome jobs for him! But Billy was glad that she meant to walk home, all the same.

'I am doing a constitutional, too,' he said. 'Perhaps—if you didn't mind—we might keep each other company.'

She assented at once. He gathered from her manner that she had rather expected his proposition, and that she had a reason for agreeing to it. Perhaps, in the kindness of her heart, she wanted

to try the effect of some further remonstrances upon him. That, to be sure, would be a waste of breath; still, it would be happiness to be alone with her and to hear her voice, whatever she might think fit to say to him.

They did not return by the dusty highroad. Miss Forbes said that, if he wasn't in a hurry, she would prefer the Chemin des Aqueducs, a shady, winding road which follows the contour of the hills to the westward of Algiers, and which is certainly not adapted to meet the requirements of persons in a hurry. But Billy was very far from being such a person just then, and, after a steep climb through the white village of Isly, he gazed forward with satisfaction upon a long succession of clefts and ravines, into every one of which, as he knew, the sinuous way that lay before them plunged deeply. The vegetation on those hillsides is something marvellous to Northern eyes. The woods of ilex and silvery olives, with here and there a tall palm among them, the ragged bananas stooping over the garden-walls; above all, the profusion of creepers

and the giant ivy which hangs in festoons from tree to tree—these, bathed in the intense yet mellow light of an Algerian sun, must needs move even an exiled fox-hunter and a disconsolate lover to appreciative wonder. Billy paid his tribute to the exquisite designs of Nature in characteristic terms.

‘This fairly takes the cake!’ he ejaculated. ‘I ain’t much of a judge of scenery, but I’d back Algiers to romp in from any other place within a thousand miles of England.’

‘Yet you are going to leave it,’ remarked Winifred.

‘Well—I must, you know.’

‘No, I don’t know that at all. I don’t understand your leaving like this. I wish you would explain.’

She spoke with an impatience which astonished him; if she did not understand, neither did he. But of course he could explain, and he proceeded to do so.

Even after listening to a perfectly explicit state-

ment, Winifred did not appear to be satisfied. 'I suppose you must be speaking the truth,' she said; 'but I did not expect you to talk like that. A month ago I should have expected it—I shouldn't have wondered; but—but I thought you had changed some of your ideas of late. Certainly you have behaved as if you had.'

He heard her with increasing amazement. There could be no doubt now that she was reproaching him—but with what? It seemed sheer insanity to hope; and yet every word that she said seemed to be uttered with the deliberate intention of giving him hope. As they paced along from sunlight to shade, and out into the sunlight again, she begged him to be straightforward with her, and to tell her candidly whether anything had occurred to give him offence. If so, she believed she would be able to set it right. 'It is so much better to speak out while there is still time. Unless you speak out now, you will be sorry afterwards, I think.'

Mortal man could not resist that. Billy stopped short and threw out his hands.

‘God knows I would have spoken long ago if I had thought—if I had dared to think—that there was the ghost of a chance for me!’ he exclaimed. ‘Even now I can hardly believe that there isn’t some mistake, and I don’t know what to say. But there is nothing really to say, because you have heard everything. You know how I love you, you know all about Blanche Littlewood—all that there is against me. I don’t think it’s so very bad—at least, not according to my lights. If it’s bad of me to throw her over, I can’t help it; nobody could help it! One thing I can tell you truly: I have never loved any woman on earth but you, and never so long as I live——’

‘Stop! stop!’ interrupted Winifred in a strangled voice. She had dropped in a sitting posture upon the parapet by the wayside; her cheeks were pale and her eyes dilated. ‘You were right,’ she went on presently; ‘there has been a mistake—a horrible mistake! I don’t think it can have been my fault; I hope you will believe that I

never had the most distant suspicion of this! I was thinking of—of something quite different.’

Billy’s heart sank.

‘But you did know that I loved you,’ he murmured; ‘you must surely have known that!’

‘Oh no!—how could I? It is the last thing that I should ever have dreamt of!’ She got up, and continued in a calmer and more constrained voice: ‘Perhaps I had better tell you that I am engaged to be married. I have been engaged for some years to a Mr. Kirby, a neighbour of ours at home.’

Billy groaned.

‘Then, it would have been hopeless, anyhow,’ he remarked.

‘Yes, of course it would. I am very, very sorry; I wish I hadn’t spoken as I did just now! You must have thought,’ exclaimed Winifred, the pallor of her cheeks becoming replaced by a vivid blush as she recalled her indiscreet utterances—‘you must have thought I was proposing to you! But you understand now, or, rather, you don’t understand,

and I don't want you to understand. Mr. Bellew, will you please try to forget what I said ?

‘Yes, I’ll try, if you wish it,’ answered Billy dismally.

He was still quite in the dark as to her original meaning ; but that was of small consequence.

Her present meaning was clear enough to force itself upon the most obtuse comprehension. After an interval of silence, during which they had resumed their walk, he asked :

‘If this man Kirby had never existed, do you think—would it have been possible for you ever to have cared for me ?’

‘As if anybody could answer such a question !’ she returned irritably. But then she caught sight of his woebegone countenance and was moved to compassion. ‘What might have been if everything had been different isn’t much to the purpose, is it ?’ she resumed in a gentler tone. ‘But I can’t believe that we should ever have been suited to one another, you and I. We are so very unlike in all our habits and tastes. You, I suppose, live chiefly

for sport, and sport has no attractions for me. My mission in life is to keep house and nurse people when they are ill, and make myself generally useful in a humdrum sort of way. You would be bored to death if you were condemned to spend the rest of your days with a person of that description ; and if you will only try to realise what I am and what you are, I am sure you will see, after a time, that you have had a lucky escape.'

Billy smiled, but made no rejoinder. After they had walked about a hundred yards farther in silence, he said :

' Perhaps I had better leave you now, hadn't I ? I can't talk, and I believe there's a short cut to the hotel from here. To-morrow I shall come and say good-bye to you all. By that time I shall be able to behave properly, I hope, and to look as if nothing had happened.'

She did not attempt to detain him, but she gave him her hand and repeated that she was very sorry, whereupon they parted. Winifred walked steadily on, but Billy remained standing still, with his

hands clasped behind his back and his head bowed. When, five minutes later, a bend of the road brought her once more in sight of the spot where she had left him, he had not yet stirred.

CHAPTER XV.

BILLY TAKES LEAVE.

UNSELFISHNESS is probably a virtue which, like other virtues, admits of adoption and cultivation ; but we may safely assume that in nine cases out of every ten in which it is displayed the quality is inborn. Winifred Forbes was scarcely conscious of the fact that the welfare of others was more important to her than her own ; so that psychologists may, if they please, deny her any credit for being what she was. Nevertheless, she was, to say the least of it, a little unusual, and the manner in which she was affected by Mr. Bellew's unforeseen declaration of love was scarcely that which it would have produced upon the majority of young women.

What in the world was to become of Daisy ? and how was she to be comforted ? This was what Winnie kept asking herself, as she tramped along the Chemin des Aqueducs, looking neither to right nor left, and advancing more quickly than was necessary towards the goal that she dreaded. She had now no doubt, nor had she had any for some time past, that her sister was in earnest. A hundred trivial incidents had betrayed the girl's secret ; she was not flirting this time ; she had not refused Harry Lysaght out of mere perversity ; she had confidently anticipated what could never come ; and Daisy, alas ! was not one who knew how to bear disappointment or humiliation. It would be terrible to have to tell her the truth ; yet of course she must be told.

‘ She is sure to blame me,’ thought Winifred disconsolately, ‘ and it does look as if I had been to blame. Everybody would say so ; everybody agrees that men don't propose without some sort of encouragement. And the worst of it is, that I did seem to encourage him this afternoon, though I

never did before—never, I am certain, before ! Oh, what a dolt I was, and how thankful I am that he was too stupid to see what I was driving at ! Only I suppose he will see when he comes to think it over ; even he can hardly be so simple as to imagine that I meant nothing at all.’

She laughed a little, as she recalled their conversation at cross-purposes, for all the world knows that grief and vexation are not incompatible with laughter. Then, being somewhat out of breath, as well as conscious of a certain trembling in the lower limbs, she sat down on the bank by the roadside, and tried to remember exactly what she had said to him and what he had said to her. No great effort of memory was required to bring it all back to her with dreadful distinctness. He had been reluctant to speak out ; she had insisted upon his doing so ; she had told him as plainly as possible that he was behaving badly by leaving the place ; she had offered to explain away any misunderstanding which might have arisen—in short, it must be absolutely obvious to him that, since she

had not been pleading her own cause, she had been pleading that of her sister. Then, in the natural sequence of things, she came to his amazing avowal, to her reception of it, to that last query of his which she impatiently stigmatized at the time as not being to the purpose. Assuredly it had not been to the purpose,—and perhaps, strictly speaking, he had had no business to ask such a question; yet she lingered for some minutes over the recollection of it, and wondered dreamily what would or might have happened if there had been no Edmund Kirby, no Daisy, and no Mrs. Littlewood to create complications.

Speculations of that kind are apt to be dangerous, and Winifred, after pursuing them for a short space, found herself upon the very brink of a discovery which she had no desire to make. She sprang back just in time to save herself from making it—in time, at least, to save herself from admitting that she had made it—and turned resolutely to the consideration of how she might best communicate the bad news to her family. She concluded at length that she was not bound to

say anything about Mr. Bellew's proposal to herself; it would be sufficient to state the bare fact that he was going away; and if his departure should be attributed to Mrs. Littlewood's influence, that, after all, would be the cause to which he himself had assigned it. The only thing was that Daisy must, by some means or other, be preserved from humbling herself before him; and that could be managed, Winifred thought. His leave-taking must of necessity be brief and formal, and Daisy should certainly not be left alone with him for a moment.

Having decided upon her line of action, she walked home, and, as it happened, saw nobody until the dinner-hour. Then, of course, she had to speak. She opened her mouth to do so several times without succeeding in getting out a word, but at length she forced herself to begin, in what, as she was painfully aware, sounded quite unlike her ordinary voice:

‘By the way, I met Mr. Bellew at the ticket office; he was engaging passages for Tunis. He is

going there with Colonel and Mrs. Littlewood in a few days. They are not coming back again.'

After firing off these abrupt sentences, she attacked her soup with great vigour, and went near to choking herself over it. She did not dare to look up, and for a few seconds the silence was unbroken. At length Micky ejaculated in accents of consternation :

'Oh, I say !'

The clock had ticked off another dozen or so of interminable seconds before Mrs. Forbes remarked severely, but rather tremulously :

'I am very sorry to hear that that—that disgraceful intrigue has not come to an end ; and I am very sorry, too, that we have allowed Mr. Bellew to be so much about the house. I think, Winnie dear, you have been scarcely prudent in throwing—er—er—Micky at his head, as you have done of late.'

But Daisy said nothing at all. When Winifred ventured to raise her eyes, she saw that the girl had fallen back in her chair and that her face was as

white as the tablecloth. There was no concealment nor any attempt at concealment on her part ; Daisy never did — perhaps could not — disguise her emotions. Winifred at once began to talk, and continued to talk incessantly for a matter of ten minutes. It was the only thing to be done, but it was not the easiest thing in the world to do, because nobody helped her. At last even Mr. Forbes, short-sighted and self-absorbed as he was, ended by suspecting that something was the matter. He peered over his spectacles at his younger daughter, and said :

‘ Daisy, my love, are you feeling unwell ? If so, had you not better retire to your room and lie down ? You appear to me to be upon the verge of one of those attacks of syncope to which young persons of your sex are frequently liable. Cold water and smelling-salts are, I believe, generally found to be efficient remedies.’

Daisy pushed back her chair, got up, and left the room without a word. Winifred rose with the intention of following her, but was detained by her father, who wanted to have the leg of a chicken

divided for him. When he tried to accomplish such operations for himself the result generally was that his neighbour received the chicken bone, while everybody else within range of him was splashed all over with gravy. Having fulfilled the filial duty required of her, Winifred made for the door, throwing an interrogative glance at her mother, who responded peevishly in an undertone :

‘ Oh yes, if you like ! But she isn’t going to faint, and she doesn’t want you.’

Mrs. Forbes was mistaken ; for Daisy, who, like the rest of the family, instinctively turned to Winnie in times of tribulation, did want her sister. That, however, did not prevent her from according her sister an extremely discourteous reception. She had thrown herself down upon the bed, and when the intruder entered, she started up, saying :

‘ What do you want ? Have you come to exult over me and to tell me that you knew all along how it would be ? Perhaps you would like to telegraph for Harry Lysaght. I dare say he will come if you do ; he isn’t proud.’

Perhaps Daisy was not very proud, either. That thought did present itself to Winifred's mind ; but she was too sorry and too full of sympathy for the poor little spoilt child to dwell upon it. She set to work to discharge a mission for the accomplishment of which she possessed exceptional facilities, and in a few minutes Daisy, who had thrown her arms round the consoler's neck, was sobbing out broken-heartedly : 'Oh, Winnie, what shall I do ? what shall I do ?'

Well, there really was not very much to be done, except to put a brave face upon disaster and to trust to the healing influences of time ; but neither of these courses could be recommended without an appearance of cruelty. Unfortunately, too, Winifred was debarred from holding out any of those fallacious hopes which it may have been expected of her that she should suggest. In honesty, as well as in kindness, she was bound to make it clear that, in her opinion, Mr. Bellew had no intentions, and it was some slight comfort to find that that was Daisy's own conviction.

‘I have been caught in my own trap,’ the girl said forlornly. ‘He thought I was only flirting with him—oh, I saw plainly enough that that was what he thought at first!—and he determined to pay me out. He needn’t have been so cruel, though; he needn’t have tried in every possible way to make me believe that he loved me. I don’t think it was quite fair and honourable to do that, do you, Winnie?’

‘No,’ answered Winifred hesitatingly, ‘I don’t think it was—if you are sure that he did.’

‘Sure that he did! Am I likely to make a mistake about matters of that sort? Over and over again he has said things to me which could only have one meaning.’

She repeated some of his speeches. Perhaps he had really made them; perhaps she only thought that he had made them; in either case she had read her own meaning into them, as the ineradicable habit of her sex is. Happily, it did not occur to her to blame her sister; the vials of her wrath, when these took the place of despondency, were

poured forth upon Mrs. Littlewood, only a small portion of the overflowing measure being reserved for Billy. If she had shown a little more indignation against the latter, Winifred would have been better pleased and less apprehensive. By hook or by crook she must be kept from seeing Mr. Bellew and betraying herself, as she almost certainly would, in the event of her being brought face to face with him. When Daisy was happy or unhappy, pleased or angry, she never cared who knew it. She had practised no sort of deceit in her life, save such as she was wont to exercise in dealing with her admirers, and even that could hardly be called deceit of a very subtle character. It turned out, however, that Daisy did not wish to see Mr. Bellew again.

‘If he asks for me you can tell him that I have gone out,’ she said; ‘I don’t want him to know how miserable he has made me, though I suppose he does know. I shall never care for anybody else as long as I live—never! And to think that he cares for that hideous, painted

old creature, whom he pretended to find such a bore !'

It would have made matters no better to suggest that perhaps he didn't care for the hideous, painted old creature, and Winifred maintained a guilty silence. It was at least some relief to know that Mr. Bellew's farewell visit, to which she looked forward with no little personal dread, would now in all probability prove a very brief and formal affair.

Mr. Bellew's visit did not disappoint expectation in that respect. He arrived shortly after three o'clock on the following afternoon, and brevity, even if his own inclinations had not tended that way, would have been urged upon him by the excessive formality of Mrs. Forbes, who was inwardly furious. It must be confessed that most mothers would have been furious in her place. To have lost a son-in-law of such rare excellence and desirability as Harry Lysaght was bad enough; but to have been made a positive fool of by the man whom, against her better judgment, she had

consented to accept as a *pis-aller* was more than mortal woman could bear with equanimity. Still, prudence always counsels the concealment of our wounds, and a lucky thing it was for Mrs. Forbes that she had to deal with so unsuspecting and so preoccupied a personage as Billy Bellew.

He noticed, indeed, what he could hardly help noticing, that her manner was unusually cold; but he thought it very likely that she had been told of his offer to her elder daughter, and had been annoyed by it. For the rest, he said scarcely anything to her, beyond thanking her for her hospitality, and it was Winifred who preserved the short conversation from dying of inanition. Winifred was very nervous, and so was he; but, all things considered, they performed their respective parts creditably enough. When he rose to go, he cast an imploring glance at her, the meaning of which she understood, though she was doubtful about the wisdom of complying with his mute request. But pity or good nature, or perhaps an unacknowledged desire to say a last kind

word to him, got the better of her hesitation, and she followed him out to the front-door.

‘Thank you for coming,’ he said gratefully, as he stood, with bared head, in the full blaze of the sunshine. ‘I wanted just to tell you how sorry I am if I distressed or vexed you yesterday. Of course I shouldn’t have spoken as I did if I had known about that—about the other man.’

‘Of course not; and of course you could not know,’ answered Winifred. ‘Perhaps I ought to have told you before; but I never thought for a moment—it seemed so utterly unlikely——’

‘I don’t see why it should have seemed unlikely,’ said poor Billy.

‘Oh, I think you must, if you will consider! But there is no help for it now, and you haven’t distressed me—at least, not for myself. We must try to forget it, and—and part friends.’

‘And am I never to see you again?’

Winifred looked down. ‘I don’t want to be disagreeable,’ she answered; ‘but I think, if we were to meet by chance in London or anywhere,

it would be better for us to do no more than bow or shake hands. For many reasons, I would rather you didn't come and call.'

'Yes; I understand what you mean by "many reasons," and I dare say you are quite right. The only thing is that supposing—such a thing might happen, and sometimes I think it will—supposing I were no longer—in fact, that I were no longer upon quite such intimate terms with Mrs. Littlewood as I am now, might I call then?'

It was impossible for Winifred to explain that Mrs. Littlewood was not the obstacle. She fenced the question by replying: 'I don't know why you should wish for anything of the kind. Your calling upon us would only be embarrassing, and——'

'And it would not make you change your mind?'

'Of course it would not do that.'

'Well, nothing will ever make me change my mind, either. You are the only woman in the world for me, now and always. I hope you'll forgive my saying so, and remember that I said so.'

All sorts of strange things come to pass, and so long as you are unmarried there must be just a chance for me, however poor it may be. Such as it is, I'm going to take that chance.'

Winifred entreated him not to cherish any illusions of that description. She reminded him of what she had told him on the preceding day. It was not only that she was engaged to Edmund Kirby, who was getting on very well in his profession and would probably be in a position to marry before long, but that she felt sure she was utterly unfitted to be the wife of a sporting man. He must look out for some nice girl who was fond of hunting and knew a little about racing. 'And when you have found her, I will come to your wedding, if I am asked,' she added reassuringly.

'You will never come to my wedding unless you come as the bride, Miss Forbes,' answered Billy. 'Please believe that, because it's the truth.'

He was going to add something more ; but at that

moment Mrs. Forbes, who doubtless thought that her unwelcome visitor had taken himself off by this time, was heard impatiently calling her daughter from the drawing-room ; so their leave-taking was curtailed. Billy was halfway down the avenue before it occurred to him that he had omitted to send a message of farewell either to Miss Daisy or to Micky.

As regarded the latter, however, an opportunity of making amends for his forgetfulness was granted to him. He had not proceeded many yards along the lane which leads to Le Bocage, when a small figure jumped down from the high bank on his left hand, and, barring his passage, asked breathlessly : ‘ Oh, Mr. Bellew, are you really going away ? ’

‘ Yes, Micky, I’m off,’ he replied, with an assumption of brisk cheerfulness. ‘ The best of friends must part, you know.’

‘ And ain’t I ever to see you again ? ’ the boy asked, putting the same question that Billy himself had put a few minutes before, but looking even more dolorous over it. The truth was that Micky’s

tears were not very far off; though he would never have forgiven himself if he had allowed them to fall in the presence of one who would naturally despise such a girlish exhibition of weakness.

‘Oh, you’ll see me again right enough,’ answered Billy. ‘In another year or two we shall have you out hunting in Leicestershire, and then you’ll be pretty safe to come across me, unless I break my neck in the meantime. Remember what I told you about sitting in the right place and keeping your hands low.’

The boy nodded, not being quite sure enough of his voice to make any articulate reply.

‘And look here,’ Billy went on, ‘we’ve been capital friends, you and I, haven’t we? I should like to give you some little thing just to put you in mind of me now and then.’ He detached a small gold compass from his watch-chain. ‘It isn’t worth an awful lot of money,’ he remarked; ‘but I’ve found it useful more than once when I’ve lost my way in a fog or been overtaken by the darkness a dozen miles or so away from home.’

Micky's small brown fingers closed over the gift. 'I'll never lose it,' he said. And then, after a short pause: 'Mr. Bellew, I want to say something to you. I know well enough what has happened; I know why you're going away; the others didn't notice Winnie's face last night, but I did. And it isn't all up yet—it isn't really!'

Billy did not resent this plain speaking on the part of his young friend, nor did he affect to misunderstand it. He only smiled, and answered: 'I'm afraid it is all up, Micky; anyhow, she says it is.'

'That's only because she thinks she is bound to Edmund Kirby; and I don't believe she cares a brass farthing for him really. He's an awful stick!'

'Oh, he's an awful stick, is he? Still, she may be fond of him. She told me she didn't like sporting men very much.'

'Don't you believe it! She likes *you*, at all events; and if you'll only stick to it, and look us up in England, it will all come right at last, I'm

sure. It's quite on the cards that Kirby may throw her over. He can't be in any desperate hurry to marry her, because they've been engaged since the flood, and it's all bosh about his not having money enough. I've heard mamma say so lots of times.'

This was good hearing, and Billy was so much in want of a little encouragement that he may be excused for having clutched at the straw extended to him. However, as he reflected, after taking leave of his juvenile counsellor, to whom he gave a solemn promise that he would write sometimes, there was another little difficulty of which the astute Micky knew nothing. That Winnie should be set free by Edmund Kirby would not be enough; it would still remain for him to obtain his release from Blanche Littlewood, who was just about as likely to let him go of her own free will as an Arab slave-trader is to liberate his captives in an access of philanthropy.

CHAPTER XVI.

BILLY HANDS IN HIS RESIGNATION.

THE town of Tunis, notwithstanding the French occupation, has not yet lost its Oriental character. The majestic Moors who stalk through its narrow, ill-paved streets, or sit gravely smoking at the doors of their shops in the covered bazaars, still retain the eye for colour of which close contact with civilization seems fated to deprive their race, and wear clothes that delight the gaze of the wandering artist. The long strings of camels, the fat Jewesses in their amazing costume of short jackets and closely-fitting tights, the scowling fanatics who guard the approaches to the mosques—these and a hundred other everyday sights give

evidence of a more primitive and more picturesque phase of Eastern life than can be looked for now in Algiers.

But the novelty and picturesqueness of the Bey's capital left Billy Bellew cold and indifferent. To him it was nothing more than a yellow primrose was to the insensible Peter Bell. It was a dirty town in North Africa where there was an uncomfortable hotel, a varied assortment of bad smells and nothing particular to do, except to visit the bazaars with Mrs. Littlewood and purchase innumerable things that he didn't want. Mrs. Littlewood wanted them, and got them; which was, perhaps, fortunate, inasmuch as the acquisition of marvellous shot silks and pieces of embroidery and carpets kept her in a tolerably good humour. Billy paid without bargaining. After all, that was what he was there for. It was a pity nature had made him such a very poor dissembler; because, if he could have contrived to look only ordinarily cheerful, he would have spared himself some unpleasant moments. As it was, Mrs. Little-

wood's good humour was intermittent, and when she became provoked with him, she did not spare him.

'Don't you think you had better return to Algiers?' she asked him one afternoon. 'You have evidently left your heart there, and by going back you might possibly find it again. I should recommend you to stay three or four weeks and to make a point of seeing Miss Forbes every day. If that won't cure you, your case must indeed be hopeless!'

'I don't see the good of talking like that,' returned Billy. 'You know very well that I have taken my passage for Palermo, according to your instructions. As for Miss Forbes, it may interest you to hear that she is engaged to be married to some man who lives near them in Shropshire.'

Mrs. Littlewood raised her artistically-pencilled eyebrows and pursed up her lips. 'Oh, that's it, is it?' said she. 'Now we know why you have been looking as if you meditated self-destruction all this time! So she told you that she was

engaged, did she? What could you have been saying to her to draw forth that confidential information? Well, I condole with you; though it is a comfort to think that you will soon be yourself again. Nobody has better reason than I have to be aware of the ease with which you recover from these little attacks.'

Sometimes she made his life a burden to him after that fashion; sometimes she had recourse to tears and reproaches. Neither method was agreeable; but of the two he preferred the former, and this, contrary to precedent, was the more frequently employed. He suspected, and could not help hoping, that Blanche had grown rather weary of him. Of course it was no longer possible for him to deceive himself as to the fact that he had grown terribly weary of her.

Better times—comparatively better times—were, however, in store for this unhappy lingerer in a false position. The resources of Tunis having been exhausted, the party took ship at La Goletta for Sicily; and when they reached Palermo, after a

rough passage, which one of them bore very badly, were received on disembarking by a tall man with a heavy moustache who did not seem in the least surprised to see them.

‘Don’t look at me!’ cried Mrs. Littlewood, waving him off with her sunshade. ‘How could you be so cruel as to come and meet sea-sick people! Alfred, please take Captain Patten away and engage him in conversation. No words can describe what I have suffered on board that horrible steamer, and I know I must be of a livid green colour.’

She really was not; her cheeks had the usual lilac tint which, in these days, is considered such a vast improvement upon natural hues, and Captain Patten gallantly, but laboriously, rose to the level of the occasion.

‘Not at all, Mrs. Littlewood, I assure you,’ he declared. ‘You’re looking as fresh as a—as a—as I don’t know what. You are, upon my word!’

Captain Patten was a man of few words; but what he lacked in eloquence he doubtless made up

in power of appreciation. Billy was very pleased indeed to see him, and had not the common-sense to affect annoyance at having been kept in the dark as to what was obviously a preconcerted arrangement. Yet, stupid and provoking though he was, Mrs. Littlewood abstained for some days from avenging herself upon him. Perhaps she thought that she was avenging herself upon him by leaving him severely alone while she explored the town and its vicinity under the guidance of his long-legged substitute; perhaps she honestly enjoyed a change. Either way, he obtained a period of leisure, which Colonel Littlewood kindly strove to enliven for him. Colonel Littlewood, it may be, was becoming a trifle nervous. For many good reasons he did not want to offend Billy Bellew, and, although he reposed an admiring confidence in Blanche's knowledge of what she was about, it did, perhaps, occur to him that there is such a thing as slipping between two stools.

'Patten's a rare good fellow. Not much in Blanche's style, you know,' he was careful to

explain ; ‘ but she took pity upon him at Hammam R’irha, because he didn’t seem to know what to do with himself, poor beggar ! He talks of coming on to Italy with us. I hope you won’t mind him, Bellew. Quiet sort of chap ; won’t bother you in any way. Was in some cavalry regiment, I forget which ; but had enough of the service, and is wandering about now, trying to amuse himself. Seems to have plenty of the needful.’

In accents which had the unmistakable ring of veracity, Billy expressed his willingness to welcome this addition to their party. As a matter of fact, Captain Patten did not bother him ; Captain Patten bothered nobody. He was very solemn, very silent, and apparently very devoted to the sprightly little lady who had flung her net over him. When a move was made to Naples, he gravely accepted the post assigned to him, and was privileged to discharge some of the duties which had hitherto fallen to Mr. Bellew’s share. If he was jealous of the man whom he had superseded, he kept his jealousy, like his other emotions, discreetly veiled from the

eyes of the world, while that dull-witted Billy never made the slightest pretence of being jealous of him.

It was from Naples that our hero despatched the first of a series of letters which Micky Forbes carried about in his pocket until they reached a grimy and crumpled old age. They are still extant; but perhaps it is as well not to quote them at length, because the truth is that Billy's epistolary style was not quite on a level with that of Lord Chesterfield or Madame de Sévigné. As, however, they elicited replies in due course, they may be considered to have served their purpose. The one which bears the Naples postmark contains more questions than information; but Captain Patten is alluded to in the course of it, and mention is made of the circumstance that Mrs. Littlewood and that gentleman are absent on an excursion to Pompeii.

'As for me,' the writer continues, 'I haven't got anything to do, except to sit here at the window and wish to heaven I was on board the steamer that sails for England to-night. It's jolly hot, and

the water is about as blue as they make it; but I'm dead sick of foreign parts.'

It is a fact that Mr. Bellew spent a whole week at Naples without visiting Pompeii, Herculaneum, the Museo Borbonico or Vesuvius. The same may be said of Colonel Littlewood, who, however, acquired an exhaustive knowledge of all the principal *cafés* in the place and the various liquors obtainable there. Florence was treated with equal contempt by these unworthy travellers. To be sure, there chanced to be a race-meeting at the Cascine, to which Billy was permitted to conduct his friends in a carriage of his hiring, and at which he duly lost as many pairs of gloves as Mrs. Littlewood required him to lose; but churches and picture-galleries he left to Captain Patten, to whom nothing seemed to come amiss.

'It would be interesting,' remarked Mrs. Littlewood one evening, 'to hear how you pass your time. Is your own company so fascinating that you *never* tire of it?'

'Two's company, three's none,' answered Billy

good-humouredly. 'Don't you trouble about me; *I'm* all right. When I've nothing else to do I study the time-tables and calculate how long it will take us to get home.'

'I don't know how you can expect the time-tables to tell you that,' returned Mrs. Littlewood with a frown. 'We are going to Venice and a great many other places before we make for home, I hope.'

Billy made no rejoinder. He could not share in Mrs. Littlewood's hope; but he was aware that he would, at all events, have to go to Venice. When he should have tarried for a decent length of time upon the shores of the Adriatic, it would surely be permissible for him to mention that a good many people were anxiously awaiting his return to his native land.

Probably the whole world can show no more lovely or charming city than Venice in fine spring weather; but in order to enjoy Venice or any other place it is, of course, desirable that you should not be eager and impatient to be somewhere else, and this may account for Billy Bellew's lack of en-

thusiasm in gazing upon a scene which called forth some guarded expressions of approval from Colonel Littlewood himself. Nevertheless, Billy's first morning in Venice was satisfactory to him; for it brought him, amongst a heap of English letters, one with an Algerian stamp and an address written in legible, though somewhat unformed, characters. This, when opened, proved to be a truly delightful epistle. Very few people know how to write letters—Billy himself, as has been mentioned, was far from having attained proficiency in that art—but there are just a few who seem to know by instinct exactly what to say to their correspondents, and Micky Forbes was of the number.

‘Upon my word, that’s a wonderful boy!’ exclaimed Billy aloud, after he had perused the two closely written sheets forwarded to him by his young friend. ‘He’ll be a great man one of these days, you see if he won’t! Grammar and spelling be hanged! He can describe things in a way that makes you see them, and that’s more than I could do if my life depended on it.’

A more dispassionate critic might have pronounced a less flattering verdict, but it was certainly true that Micky's composition betrayed a clear comprehension of what Mr. Bellew would like to hear. The doings of the Forbes family were faithfully reported therein, but only one of the family was dealt with in detail, and what was said about her was of a nature to give comfort to a friend whose absence she was represented as deploring. Winnie, it appeared, had not been a bit like herself since Mr. Bellew's departure. She had been dull and out of spirits, she was always wishing that the time had come for them to leave Algiers, she had even gone so far as to confide to the writer that she did not feel particularly well or happy.

'She's not really seedy, though,' Micky thoughtfully added; 'it isn't that. Thank goodness, I'm not seedy either! The doctor says I'm as fit as a flea now, and we are to cross to Marseilles the day after to-morrow. I don't know whether I'm to go back to school this summer or not, but I expect not, and we are pretty sure to be in London next

month. *Do* look out for us. I shall look out for you everywhere. And please write again soon.'

How, after that, was Billy to help resolving that, come what might of it, he would be in London during the course of the ensuing month? After all, there would probably be no difficulty, for it was reasonable to anticipate that the Littlewoods also would arrange to return before then. Great, therefore, was his consternation when he met Mrs. Littlewood at dinner—she had been out in a gondola with Captain Patten nearly all day—when she informed him, as a piece of news which he would be rejoiced to hear, that they had let their house in Lowndes Street for the season.

'Now,' she remarked, 'we can dawdle about as long as we like. When we are tired of this, we will go on to Milan and the lakes; afterwards, if the weather keeps fine, we might cross the Alps and wander through Switzerland. Switzerland is delightful before the tourist season sets in, and Captain Patten has never been there. So he won't

mind Lucerne and Interlaken and all the other hackneyed old places.'

Captain Patten, perceiving that he was expected to say something, departed from his usual taciturnity so far as to declare :

'Always charmed, I'm sure, to be anywhere where you are, Mrs. Littlewood.'

Billy had neither the good manners nor the hypocrisy to follow this brilliant lead. He said nothing at the time, and it was not until late in the evening that the opportunity came to him of making an announcement which he had determined to make. In the meantime he had been privileged to share a gondola with the Colonel, and in the company of that charming associate had been propelled up and down the Grand Canal in the wake of the bark which bore Mrs. Littlewood and her silent slave. The inevitable songsters, in their illuminated barges, had been bawling out 'Santa Lucia !' and 'Funicoli Funicolà !' beneath the Rialto ; the night air had been balmy, and the starlight effects exquisite, no doubt, for those who cared about such things ; but the

Colonel had been, if possible, rather more offensive than usual, and Billy had more than once longed to take him by the neck and heels and heave him overboard. But now the Colonel had gone off somewhere to quench his thirst, and Captain Patten had said good-night, and the time had evidently come for Billy to face whatever might be in store for him.

‘I’m afraid,’ he began rather abruptly, ‘I can’t manage the lakes and Switzerland; I must be getting back home. I’m sorry to be obliged to leave you, but it isn’t as though you would have nobody. Your friend Patten seems game to stay with you as long as you want him.’

Mrs. Littlewood was indolently fanning herself. She smiled, and her smile was not precisely amiable.

‘Just for the sake of curiosity,’ she remarked, ‘may I ask if you really think that Captain Patten is capable of filling your place?’

Billy looked down and fidgeted.

‘Well, he seems to have shown himself pretty

well able to fill it for some time past,' was the best reply that he could think of.

'Oh no, he hasn't; and I think you know that he hasn't. A year ago you would have been furious if I had even pretended that he had, as I have been doing lately. Come, let us be frank. You want a pretext for washing your hands of me, and I have given you one. You must admit that that was rather generous of me. Go, if you want to go, I have no power to prevent you; but please don't come back again and ask to be forgiven after you have got over your infatuation for that long, lanky girl. You have been most successful in deceiving me once; you will hardly deceive me a second time.'

Without being in the least clever or discerning, Mrs. Littlewood knew her man. Billy had always tried to behave fairly and honourably; he could not but feel that it was neither fair nor honourable to desert a woman who had avowed that she loved him and whom he had once loved; and this appeal of hers, which was not couched in the form of an appeal, would have induced him to renounce all hope of

ever winning Winifred Forbes, if anything could have induced him to do that. But nothing could. All that Mrs. Littlewood could accomplish now was to make him thoroughly ashamed of himself—as it was, perhaps, only right that he should be. He made several attempts to speak, but checked himself each time, and finally broke off in despair with :

‘It’s no use, Blanche! I can’t soften things down, much less plead excuses. You’re quite right about Miss Forbes: I do love her, though it’s true that she is engaged, as I told you, to another man. There! now you may abuse me to your heart’s content; I deserve anything that you may like to say of me.’

Mrs. Littlewood did not take advantage of the permission accorded to her; she merely said, in a low voice: ‘Thank you; at least I can’t complain of any dissimulation on your part this time. So it is all over at last! I am not surprised; I have seen for a long time what was coming; and if it hadn’t been Miss Forbes, it would have been somebody else, I suppose. I am well rewarded for all

the sacrifices that I have made ! If only I had known what you were ! But, funny as you may think it, I really did believe in you.'

Poor Billy did not think it funny at all. Probably he had never before in his life—not even when Winifred had refused him—felt more utterly wretched than he did at that moment. Yet he could not unsay what he had said, nor could he remind Blanche that such sacrifices as she had made on his account had been made entirely against his wish and approval. He had simply wanted to pass as her friend ; he still wanted to be her friend, and he was actually foolish enough to say so, instead of getting up and going away, which would have been a much better plan.

The consequence was that he had a terribly bad quarter of an hour. His feelings were not spared, his vows of days gone by were minutely recalled to his memory, his friendship was disdainfully rejected, and his presents were flung back with scorn in his teeth—though, to be sure, this latter form of chastisement proved in the sequel to be

purely metaphorical. Mrs. Littlewood would not give him her hand at parting; she said the only request she had to make of him was that he would forget her.

‘And that won’t cost you a great effort,’ she added bitterly.

The conduct of such women as Mrs. Littlewood is often perplexing. She was absolutely selfish, she had a keen eye to the main chance; in all probability she only cared for Billy Bellew because it flattered her vanity to have a docile admirer and suited her convenience to possess a liberal one. Yet she may, for the time being, have fancied that she was sincere in renouncing him and that she meant her renunciation to be final. It not unfrequently happened to her to say and do things overnight of which she repented in the morning.

But if she repented on the following morning, her repentance came too late, for Billy was up and away soon after sunrise; and sad was the soul and deep were the curses of Colonel Littlewood when he realized that his benevolent banker had absconded.

CHAPTER XVII.

EDMUND KIRBY'S HOLIDAY.

‘THIS is a thousand times worse than Algiers!’ exclaimed Daisy Forbes despondently. ‘Goodness knows, Algiers was bad enough the last part of the time; but for utter dulness and misery, home beats it hollow. One had warmth and sunshine out there, if one had nothing else.’

She had stationed herself beside one of the high narrow windows in the library of the house where she had been born, and was looking out upon a landscape which on that bitter spring afternoon looked very wintry. Winifred, who was seated at a writing-table near her, and who had been busily engaged for two hours in setting her father's bills

and other documents in order, glanced up and remarked as apologetically as if she had been answerable for the weather :

‘It is too bad of the east wind to set in at this time of year; but perhaps it won’t last. I only hope,’ she added, with a troubled look, ‘that we haven’t come back too soon.’

It was not of her sister that Winifred was thinking when the latter uneasy aspiration escaped her; but Daisy appropriated it to herself as a matter of course.

‘Oh, it isn’t the having come back to England that I mind so much,’ she returned discontentedly; ‘but why couldn’t we have stayed in London instead of rushing down here, where there’s nothing to do and nobody to talk to? We all wanted to stay in London, except you.’

Nothing can be more certain than that, if the above assertion had been true, the Forbes family would have remained in London. They would have remained there even if Daisy had been alone in desiring it; for Daisy’s wishes, which had always

been more or less paramount with her relatives, had been yielded to without thought of controversy since she had become so pale and listless and dispirited. But, as a matter of fact, the girl had declared that she hated the bare idea of theatres and society, and had begged to be removed as soon as possible to the peace and solitude of Shropshire. Winifred did not remind her of this; she only said :

‘Well, we shall be going up later, you know, when everything will be looking more cheerful. Even London isn’t very pleasant in a black east wind.’

‘A row of houses and a yellow fog would be more cheerful to look at than that!’ groaned Daisy, with a wave of her hand towards the prospect outside the windows.

Stratton Park could not be called a pretty place, although it would pass muster among a hundred other English country houses of its class. The plain white structure, built at a period when domestic architecture was little considered, stood

rather low and rather too near to a sheet of ornamental water, upon which Micky was at that moment seated in a boat, fishing for perch and tench. The garden was not much of a garden, and the park was not much of a park; but the former was bright with old-fashioned flowers during the summer season, and the latter could boast of some fine trees. Winifred rose and walked to the window.

‘I wish Micky would come in,’ she said. ‘It seems a shame to send for him; but he must be perished with cold.’

‘Oh, I should think so,’ answered Daisy, shrugging her shoulders; ‘but you would insist upon bringing him here.’

Winifred had, it must be owned, given her vote in favour of quitting the metropolis for Shropshire. She had not been left in ignorance of Micky’s correspondence with Mr. Bellew; she had been informed that Mr. Bellew had left Venice on his way back to England, and it had seemed to her that, for Daisy’s sake, a meeting ought, if possible,

to be avoided. There was no trusting Daisy in her present mood; she was capable of doing and saying things which she might regret for the rest of her life. The girl appeared to have absolutely no self-respect; she either was or thought she was broken-hearted, and she did not care who knew it. Profoundly sorry as Winifred was for her, she could not but find her very trying at times. Before they had left Algiers she had worn her willow in so ostentatious a fashion that everybody—Lady Ottery, Mrs. Nugent and all the rest of them—had discovered what was the matter. If she were to be brought into contact again with Mr. Bellew, the chances were that even his phenomenal blindness would no longer remain proof against what could be seen with half an eye. Moreover, Winifred herself did not at all want to renew acquaintance with the disturber of their peace. He had disturbed her peace as well as Daisy's: she knew that now, having almost as little aptitude or inclination for deceiving herself as she had for deceiving others. It was not a thought to be dwelt upon; it was a

thought to be resolutely thrust away. But we know what invariably happens when Nature is driven out with a pitchfork, and Winifred had long ere this been forced to acknowledge in the secrecy of her own heart that Billy Bellew might have been more to her than he was, or ever could be now, if she had not already plighted her troth to Edmund Kirby. And Edmund, who had only found time to spend half an hour with them during their passage through London, was coming down to Stratton that very afternoon for a week's holiday. Winifred felt it to be both a melancholy and a shameful fact that she was not looking forward to his visit with any great anticipation of pleasure.

After a time Daisy consulted her watch, yawned and rose. 'That ardent lover of yours will be here presently, I suppose,' she remarked. 'I had better make myself scarce. Why he doesn't go to his own people, instead of quartering himself upon us, I can't think.'

'It isn't very comfortable for him at home; he

doesn't hit it off with his brother, you know,' said Winifred; 'but I don't think you will find him much in your way, and there isn't the slightest necessity for your leaving the room. Please don't go.'

But Daisy laughed rather ill-naturedly and replied that she hoped she knew better than to play gooseberry; added to which, she experienced no sort of yearning for Edmund Kirby's company. So she went her way; and soon afterwards the sound of carriage-wheels upon the gravel announced the arrival of the guest.

Edmund Kirby entered the library, without having even waited to remove his overcoat. He held out both his hands, which were large and strong, and his grave, uncomely countenance was illumined by a smile which rendered it at least agreeable to look upon.

'They told me I should find you here,' he said. He was a big, broad-shouldered man, who looked a good many years older than he actually was. His hair was beginning to fall off and was turning

gray at the temples ; his face, which was clean-shaven, save for a slight whisker, already exhibited permanent lines, and in the matter of features could not be described otherwise than as decidedly plain. Nevertheless, it was an honest face and by no means a stupid one. Winifred rang for tea, and ministered to his needs while he talked. His speech was much less tiresome and pedantic than his letters.

‘This is an unfortunate business about Daisy,’ he remarked after a time. ‘What made her refuse young Lysaght, do you suppose? You never gave me any distinct explanation of the affair; and I thought her looking very dull and out of sorts when I saw her in London. She hasn’t been losing her heart to an Arab chief in Algeria, I hope?’

Winifred told him the whole story. He was sure to hear it sooner or later, and she seldom kept any secrets from Edmund, who, indeed, was both a trustworthy and a sensible confidant. Only she did not mention the offer of marriage which she

had received, because that was hardly her own secret.

‘I never met Mr. Bellew,’ said he, when she had finished; ‘but I have often heard of him. He goes by the name of Billy, and is said to be one of the best gentlemen-riders living. Not my style of man, of course; but a good fellow, I should imagine, from what people say of him. There’s nothing against him to my knowledge, and he must be well off. I really see no reason why Daisy’s romance shouldn’t end happily. It would be more satisfactory, perhaps, if she would take young Lysaght; but if she won’t, she won’t.’

‘But, unluckily, it is Mr. Bellew who won’t take Daisy.’

‘That remains to be seen. I have great faith in Daisy’s powers of persuasion; and as for that Mrs. Littlewood whom you speak of, her powers can only be temporary. We lawyers hear a good deal about entanglements of that kind; they are always temporary. Mr. Bellew will be in London when you arrive; gay people like you will have no diffi-

culty in meeting him ; and then it will be all plain sailing, you'll see. Hullo ! here's Micky, with a basket full of fish. Well, Micky, how are you ? All right again ?'

Micky had reasons of his own for deploring the existence and objecting to the presence of Mr. Kirby. He said :

'Oh, how do you do ? Yes, I'm all right, thanks. Winnie, you shall have fish for breakfast to-morrow morning. Look at this big fellow ; I must put him in the scales presently ; and I've caught lots of little ones.'

'You may catch anything you like, except a chill,' said Winifred. 'Your nose is blue, and — oh, Micky, I do believe you have been wading !'

'Couldn't help it, my dear,' answered Micky ; 'but don't excite yourself. I ain't a bit cold, and I'm going off to change as soon as I've taken this basket to the kitchen.'

He departed at once on his errand, making a grimace as he went at the back of the uncon-

scious Kirby, who resumed his conversation with Winifred.

But Winifred had ceased to be an attentive listener. She was in constant alarm lest her brother should fall ill again, and every time that he came in with wet feet could think of nothing else until she had satisfied herself that all the precautions enjoined by the doctor had been taken. After returning several totally irrelevant replies to the observations of her betrothed, she begged to be excused. 'I must just see that Micky is putting on dry clothes,' she pleaded.

Edmund Kirby had been engaged for too long a time, and was too sensible a man, to be exacting. 'Don't mind me,' he answered; 'I'll go and look up Mr. Forbes; I want to have a talk with him about that last article of his. But you should beware of coddling the boy, Winnie; he'll be delicate all his life long if you adopt that system.'

Unfortunately, there are cases in which no other system can be adopted; unfortunately, also, there are people who are doomed to be delicate all their

lives long, and whose lives are not likely to be long unless they are coddled. This is what strong men, who have never known a day's serious illness, are naturally reluctant to believe; and Edmund Kirby only smiled when Winifred came into the drawing-room before dinner with a grave face, saying that she had been obliged to send Micky to bed. She wanted to send for a doctor into the bargain, but neither her father nor her mother considered that necessary. The latter remarked :

‘He seemed to be quite comfortable when I saw him just now, only a little feverish. Of course he has caught cold; but really, Winnie dear, I don't know what else you can expect if you allow him to stand about in wet boots with the thermometer almost at freezing-point.’

Winifred said no more, and the subject was dropped. She went straight upstairs after dinner, though, and did not reappear, so that Edmund Kirby went to bed with a slight sense of injury upon him. He could discuss politics, theology or philosophy with Mr. Forbes contentedly enough,

but with the ladies of the family he did not get on very well in Winifred's absence. The ladies of the family thought him a bore, and were upon sufficiently intimate terms with him to make little secret of their sentiments. They tolerated him, they acquiesced in his engagement to Winnie; but they were in no haste to welcome him as one of themselves, nor did they anticipate being called upon to do so for some time to come. Meanwhile, they had nothing particular to say to him, and when Winnie was out of the room they were very apt to ignore the circumstance that he was in it.

He was up early the next morning, as over-worked London men who are out for a country holiday always are, and at the front-door he found Dr. Hale, the local practitioner, mounting his horse.

'Hullo, doctor!' said he, 'have they sent for you to see the boy? Not much amiss, I hope?'

The doctor jerked up his bushy eyebrows, drew down the corners of his mouth, and replied: 'So do I, but one never knows how these things may

end, and he's a bad subject for inflammation of the lungs, poor little chap ! Don't tell them I said that, please ; there's no use in frightening people, and he may be quite well again in a week. By the way, have you seen your brother ?'

'Not yet,' answered Edmund ; 'I only came down last night.'

'Well, see him as soon as you can, and frighten him if you can. He is one of the people whom there may be some use in frightening.'

'Do you mean that he is ill ?' asked Edmund.

'My dear sir, he isn't ill—he is dying ! You'll find him walking and riding about, much as usual ; but he is simply killing himself. I've told him so scores of times, and he won't believe a word of it. You had better try if you can't make him believe you. Well, I must be off now ; I shall look in again this evening.'

This warning with regard to his brother gave Edmund matter for serious reflection, and perhaps caused him to think less about Micky's illness than he might otherwise have done. Neither Winifred

nor her mother came down to breakfast ; but Mr. Forbes and Daisy did not appear to be much alarmed. The former soon betook himself to his study, while the latter evidently did not deem it any part of her duty to entertain Mr. Kirby ; so he presently took his hat and stick, and, leaving a message with the butler to the effect that he would not be back until after luncheon, set off to walk to the home of his boyhood. It was rather a long walk, but he did not mind that ; what he did mind a good deal was the prospect of the reception which awaited him at the end of it.

Some people know how to perform unpleasant duties and most people know how to shirk them ; but it was Edmund Kirby's misfortune that he belonged to neither category. He had got to tell his brother sternly and forcibly that he was drinking himself to death, and in the course of that day he did so—with results which might have been foreseen. There was a terrible scene when he began to talk about hydropathic establishments and the necessity of submission to restraint ; even

poor old Mrs. Kirby, who had at first tried to mediate between the two brothers, ranged herself decisively upon the side of the elder after that, and the end of it was that Edmund had to depart with more celerity than dignity in order to avoid the scandal of a stand-up fight.

Bad news greeted him on his return to Stratton Park. Micky was worse—much worse. The doctor had again been summoned, and had made no secret of his misgivings; the whole household was in disorder and dismay, and it obviously behoved a visitor to pack his portmanteau. But Edmund was begged not to do that. He saw Winifred for a few minutes, and she assured him that there was no necessity for such a step.

‘He is very ill,’ she said, ‘and he cannot be out of danger for some days; but I am sure we shall save him—we *must*! He has youth on his side, you know; and that is the main thing. Everybody says that is the main thing. Don’t you think so yourself?’

‘While there is life there is hope,’ answered

Edmund, who certainly was not skilful in hitting upon the right thing to say. He added, somewhat more happily : 'I only wish I could be of some help to you.'

Well, he could not be of much help ; nor, for the next few days, did it look as if anybody could be of help to poor Micky, who lay fighting with such vitality as his small body contained against a malady which slays hundreds of strong men every year. But the weak sometimes win a battle in which the strong succumb ; and on the day before that which must of necessity bring Edmund Kirby's holiday to a close, the invalid was pronounced to be all but safe.

'He only wants careful nursing now,' said Winifred, who had come downstairs to announce this joyful intelligence to her betrothed. 'We have had a dreadful fright ; but we needn't be frightened any longer, thank God ! I am so sorry that your visit has been such a dismal one. Perhaps you will be able to come again later on, though. And before you go, Micky wants very

much to see you for a few minutes. He made such a point of it that Dr. Hale consented; but I am sure you will remember how weak he is and that he mustn't talk much.'

Edmund was rather surprised; for Micky and he had never been close allies, and he could not imagine what the boy could have to say to him. On the following morning, however, he of course obeyed the summons conveyed to him, and greatly shocked he was to see what a change had been wrought in the appearance of one who, to his somewhat careless scrutiny, had looked very much like other boys only a week before. Micky's cheeks had fallen in, there was not a particle of colour in his face, and his eyes had become large and brilliant. But he articulated without apparent difficulty. After sending away his nurse, he said:

'Come and sit down, Edmund; I want to talk to you. I believe I ain't going off the hooks this time, but it has been touch and go, I can tell you, and old Hale won't say I'm out of the wood yet. So, as there's something that I think you ought

to know, I won't keep it to myself upon the chance of my ever seeing you again. It's about Winnie. I want you to let her off from her engagement to you.'

Edmund stared.

'To let her off from her engagement!' he repeated. 'Why should I do that, Micky? Does she wish for a release?'

'Oh, she wishes for it right enough, only she'll never ask for it. She isn't that sort. But it's as plain as a pikestaff that you and she weren't built for one another; and it isn't asking an awful lot of you to break the thing off.'

'My dear boy,' answered Edmund, smiling, 'I don't think you can know much about that; and surely your sister and I are the best judges of our suitability to one another. I need hardly say that, if she had ceased to care for me, or—or if she had begun to care for somebody else——'

'But that's just it,' interrupted Micky. 'She *does* care for somebody else, and I'm perfectly certain that her only reason for refusing him was that she thought herself bound to you. You may

have heard her speak of Mr. Bellew. Well, he's the man.'

Edmund shook his head, still smiling.

'Oh no,' said he, 'you have made a little mistake, my boy; you forget, perhaps, that you have two sisters.'

But Micky was able, in a very few words, to demonstrate that he was under no misapprehension. If, in the course of the disclosures which he proceeded to make, he was not very tender to the feelings of his auditor, it must be remembered, in justice to him, that he did not believe his auditor's feelings to be in any great danger of laceration. For the rest, Edmund Kirby was a barrister by profession, and a man of strong will and steady nerves by nature. His face betrayed little emotion when Micky had made an end of speaking, and he said quietly, as he rose:

'Well, my boy, I'm obliged to you for what you have told me, and I will give the matter full and careful consideration. I shall not say anything to your sister before I leave—it will be better not to disturb

her at present—but I will promise you not to force myself upon her in any way, and if she ever marries me it will be of her own free will. More than that I do not feel justified in saying for the moment; but you may rely upon that, and I hope it will satisfy you.'

Micky knitted his brows. He would have preferred a promise of immediate retirement; but one cannot expect to get everything, and he knew that Edmund Kirby was, as he mentally phrased it, 'a straight fellow, though he was such a solemn old stick.' He therefore nodded acquiescence and fell back upon his pillows, for in truth he was not equal to more words.

Half an hour later Edmund had bidden a cheerful farewell to his entertainers and had driven away to the railway-station. He obtained a compartment in the train to himself, and greatly astonished Micky would have been if he could have seen the 'solemn old stick' seated there motionless, with his head buried in his hands, the whole way up to London.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BILLY GETS HIS COMPASS BACK.

For some days after Edmund Kirby's departure Micky continued, as Winifred asserted and believed, to make steady progress towards recovery ; but Dr. Hale would not say that his patient was out of danger yet, nor did he appear to be thoroughly satisfied with the results of his daily examination. One morning he betook himself to Mr. Forbes's study, instead of leaving the house as usual, and stated plainly that he would like to have a second opinion.

'Oh, certainly, Dr. Hale, if you wish it,' said Mr. Forbes, looking up from the volumes which he was consulting with the air of one who has been

rather unwarrantably disturbed. 'My daughter gave me to understand that there was no further cause for anxiety ; still, if you wish it, I will of course write or telegraph to any London physician whom you may think proper to name.'

'I do wish it, and there is great cause for anxiety, and it will be better to telegraph than to write,' answered Dr. Hale bluntly, for he was not best pleased with what he considered to be the old gentleman's selfish apathy. 'Unfortunately, the symptoms which have shown themselves are not such as to admit of doubt or discussion, but you will probably be glad afterwards to think that you had the best advice obtainable.'

He named a celebrated authority on pulmonary diseases, undertook to despatch the telegram himself, so as to save time, and marched off, leaving Mr. Forbes a little alarmed and a good deal put out. Winifred was immediately summoned to her father's presence, and was asked to be so kind as to explain what the meaning of all this was.

'Dr. Hale is a well-intentioned man, I have no

doubt,' Mr. Forbes said ; ' but his manner is almost offensively brusque, and he really shows very little consideration either for my peace of mind or for my pocket. I do not grudge necessary expenditure—I have in fact sanctioned it ; but at the same time I do not think that the cost of bringing a London physician down to Shropshire ought to be lightly incurred.'

It was not very easy to explain that the expenditure was necessary, although the danger was imaginary ; but Winifred, who was accustomed to managing her father, contrived, somehow or other, to reassure him upon both points. She did not want him to be frightened, she declared that she herself was not frightened ; and perhaps it was not exactly fear, at least, not fear of the very worst, that kept knocking for admittance at the door of her heart. If it was, she kept the door tightly barred. She could not believe, she would not allow herself to believe, that Micky's life was in peril. From the first she had been certain that he would get well, and she clung obstinately to the

conviction even after the great man had come and gone without uttering a single word of encouragement, even after it had become manifest to everybody in the sick-room, except herself, that the boy's strength was fast ebbing away.

What did distress her terribly, but more because of its pathos than because she realized the significance of the symptom, was that his mind had begun to wander. He was always fancying himself back in Algiers, always talking about riding, always eagerly appealing to somebody who was absent to say whether he was not sitting better, or whether he was not holding his hands right. And Mr. Bellew's name was for ever upon his lips. The little compass which Billy had given him, and the letters that he had received from Naples, Venice and other places, had been put under his pillow at his request. He constantly felt for them, and seemed to be more easy when he had clutched those treasures. One day, during an interval when he had all his wits about him, he implored Winnie to send for his beloved instructor and friend.

‘He must be in London now, and if you write to his club, he’ll get your letter. Tell him I’m very bad, and I know he’ll come. I do so want to see him, Winnie.’

How could she refuse a plea which was repeated again and again with increasing urgency? It would be awkward, perhaps even painful to have Mr. Bellevue in the house, but such considerations seemed of little importance under such circumstances. She consulted her mother—who had sunk into a state of helpless, tearful ineptitude—and who said: ‘Oh, send for him if you like—send for anybody you like. All I ask of you is to save my boy. That is the least you can do after having brought him to death’s door by your carelessness.’

Thus it came to pass that Billy, on entering his club one morning, found an envelope marked ‘Immediate,’ the contents of which caused him to turn on his heel, without waiting for breakfast, and hail a passing hansom.

‘Poor little chap!’ he exclaimed aloud, as he clambered into the vehicle; ‘what a bad job! She

doesn't say he's dying, though. Oh no, he can't be dying, you know; that would be too monstrous.'

Like Winifred, and like a great many other people—like most of us, perhaps—he had a vague impression that terrible calamities only fall upon those who have done something to deserve them. Nevertheless, every day brings us abundant proof that Job's comforters did not get to the root of the mystery, and the sun continues to shine and the rain to fall upon the just as upon the unjust. It may, too, surely be maintained that we none of us know what are calamities and what are not.

If Billy Bellew could not regard his enforced journey down to Shropshire as an unmixed calamity, he must be pardoned. He was going to see Winifred, and he had been hungering and thirsting for the sight of her all these long weeks; he had not known how much he loved her until he had been separated from her; nor, in spite of all that had passed, had he given up hope. More than once, while he was sitting in the railway-

carriage, he raised her letter to his lips. At least, he was going to see her, perhaps to spend several days in the house with her; and surely the very fact of her having sent for him might be taken as a sign that she was relenting, if only ever so little. But whatever may have been Billy's faults, selfishness was not one of them; and, notwithstanding a subdued exhilaration of which he was more than half ashamed, he did not forget the purpose of his journey. It would be an exaggeration, perhaps, to say that he was as deeply attached to Micky Forbes as Micky was to him; yet he had become very fond of the boy. He had an immense number of friends, but no near relations—nobody in whose affections he occupied the first or even the second place; assuredly nobody, except Micky, who would have thought of sending for him when overtaken by dangerous illness. Micky and he had always got on so well together, too, and had so thoroughly understood one another. One doesn't invariably get on well with one's nearest relations, nor is mutual comprehension the commonest thing in the

world even between friends. Friendship and love often have to get on as best they can without it.

But Micky was not going to die—such a thing couldn't be! A boy so clever, so plucky and (since he was an only son) so necessary, could never have been created merely that he might be extinguished before he had time to do more than just show what he was made of. Thus Billy quieted the misgivings which he could not stifle altogether. He turned impatiently away from the coachman who had been sent to meet him at the station on his arrival, and who, in answer to his inquiry, said sorrowfully: 'Sinking fast, sir; nothing can't save him now, they tell me.' People of that class always insist upon making the worst of things, he thought.

The worst had, however, already happened. Already the blinds were drawn down at Stratton Park. Dr. Hale, who rode away from the house while Mr. Bellew was approaching it, was frowning and biting his lips, as even doctors sometimes find themselves compelled to do; the old butler, who

held the door open, was sobbing without shame or disguise; never again would Micky's cheery, high-pitched voice be heard within those silent walls.

'The end come very sudden, sir,' the butler said. 'We didn't none of us have much hope—not these two days; but—but—oh dear, oh dear! I don't hardly know how to bear it, sir. Seems only yesterday that he used to come running into my pantry, when 'twas as much as he could do to walk alone, and his nurse she'd scold me for giving of him biscuits. And him so full of life—and a useless old fellow like me to be left here!'

Billy scarcely heard these incoherent utterances. He was dazed and confused; he could only keep on repeating to himself stupidly, 'It is all over. The boy is dead—he is dead. I must go away; I mustn't trouble them.'

He had recovered his senses sufficiently to ask that the carriage, which had been driven round to the stables, might be brought back, when someone came swiftly down the staircase and advanced towards him across the darkened hall. Was this

Winifred?—this tall, pale, haggard woman, who said :

‘ They will have told you that you have come too late. But he would not have known you if you had come earlier ; he was quite unconscious since the middle of last night.’

She was not crying, like the butler, nor did she falter in her speech ; but an indescribable change had come over both her voice and her face. Perhaps it was not only Micky who was dead ; perhaps the old Winnie had died with him, and would return no more. For, in truth, it is a mistake to suppose that we only die once.

She went on in the same composed, level tone : ‘ You were speaking of going away again ; I hope you will not do that, unless you are obliged. We should like you to stay until after the funeral ; Micky would have wished it. And you will not be in anybody’s way ; you will only be one of several people who must be asked.’

Billy said something ; he hardly knew what. It was impossible to express what he felt while she

maintained that attitude of stony reserve, and he was sure that she did not wish him to utter commonplaces. She turned away, after giving some directions to the butler, who conducted him to his bedroom. He did not see her again until the day when poor little Micky's coffin was laid in the grave, nor did he see Mrs. Forbes, who had taken to her bed ; but Mr. Forbes and Daisy appeared at dinner the same evening, and he had several long talks with them before the uncles and cousins who had journeyed from various parts of England to attend the funeral arrived. They were both very unhappy, as was only natural, and allowances must be made for people who are very unhappy ; still, their grief occasionally took a form which was almost too much for Billy's forbearance. Mr. Forbes openly and querulously blamed Winifred for the blow which had fallen upon him and his house. She had been in charge of the boy, and she had allowed him to incur a risk which no sane person would have permitted.

‘Of course I should on no account say this to

her ; although it does seem to me that some slight acknowledgment, some few words of remorse, would not have been unbecoming on her part.'

Daisy did not go quite so far as that. What she complained of was the stubborn way in which Winnie kept them all at arm's length.

'She doesn't make the least effort to comfort any of us ; she seems to think that poor dear Micky was her exclusive property, and that nobody else has a right to be miserable, now that he is gone.'

'I am sure you do her an injustice there,' Billy declared. 'Most likely she is afraid of breaking down, and no wonder.'

'Oh, it isn't that ; it wouldn't matter if she did break down, since she won't stir beyond mamma's room or her own. We have to go about as usual and see to things.'

'But, from what the servants tell me, it is she who is making all the arrangements.'

'Yes, she is giving the orders that have to be given ; but one can't feel grateful to people who

relieve one of miseries and horrors in that hard-hearted way. She does her duty, she would always do that, only duty doesn't quite take the place of affection, does it? I don't believe Winnie has ever really cared for anyone except Micky. Certainly not for Edmund Kirby, whom she says she is going to marry.'

'You think she doesn't care for him?'

'I'm quite sure she doesn't. But I dare say she will marry him, all the same, because she will think it her duty to marry him. I can't understand that sort of self-sacrifice, can you? I see nothing admirable in it; it seems to me horrid and unnatural to marry anyone whom you don't love.'

Daisy wept pretty constantly during this and other conversations with the man whom she did love, and his heart became much softened towards her by reason of her words and her tears. He had not given her credit for so much feeling. He thought it very pardonable that she should long for her sister's sympathy. He was a hundred miles from suspecting that her sorrow (which was genuine

enough so far as it went) was beginning to be lightened by a nascent hope of brighter days to come. Otherwise he would hardly have fallen into the extraordinary blunder of confiding his own hopes, such as they were, to her.

It was on a warm, still afternoon, when he had strolled out into the shrubberies with her, that he innocently narrated the whole story of his love and his rejection, which was listened to with the silence of profound amazement. That avowal of Billy's was probably the bitterest pill that had ever been administered to Daisy in her life; but she was not so much angry with him—though she had a confused impression that he had behaved rather deceitfully—as startled, mortified and thrown off her balance. A horse who has won every race in which he has been engaged only to be beaten at last by a rank outsider may, for anything that one knows, experience similar sensations; at all events, many horses, as Billy Bellew was aware, never run so well again after sustaining such a defeat. It was simply incomprehensible! To have been dis-

tanced by Mrs. Littlewood would have been sufficiently humiliating; still, Mrs. Littlewood, in spite of her age and her paint, was the sort of woman by whom men are frequently attracted. But Winnie, of all people in the world! Winnie, who had always been accounted the plain one of the family, who had seemed cut out for spinsterhood, and to whom the youths of the vicinity were wont to pay the doubtful compliment of treating her like a mother or an elder sister. It was fortunate for Daisy that she was not called upon to say much, and that Billy had become accustomed to hearing her speak in tremulous, tearful accents. What she did say was not particularly encouraging.

‘If you ask me, I must confess that I don’t think Winnie is at all likely to change her mind. You know what she is—a martyr to duty, and she is engaged to Edmund Kirby. Besides, with her straight-laced ideas—you see, people did talk a good deal about you and Mrs. Littlewood in Algiers.’

‘Oh yes ; I know there’s that,’ answered Billy sorrowfully.

‘I should think that would be almost enough in itself ; but of course one can never tell. I think, if you don’t mind, I will go indoors again now. I feel so wretchedly ill, and it seems too heartless to be talking of engagements and marriages at a time like this.’

Billy had no more private interviews with Miss Daisy Forbes after that. The uncles and cousins descended like a flight of crows in their black habiliments. On the morning of the funeral Edmund Kirby also arrived, so that the rivals were able to scrutinize one another, and even to exchange a few words. Both of them were fair-minded men, and the judgment of neither was prejudiced ; but it was scarcely within the limits of possibility that they should make friends. For the rest, the occasion did not admit of that, and one of them was so overcome by the sadness of the ceremony in which they presently had to take part

that he had enough to do to abstain from making a fool of himself.

When all was over, and when the mourners had returned to the house, Winifred, who had stood with unfaltering composure beside the grave which her mother and sister had not felt equal to approaching, sent a message to Mr. Bellew that she would like to see him for a few minutes before he left. He found her waiting for him in the library, a slim black figure against the gray sky; for she had stationed herself close to one of the windows, with her back turned towards it. Not being a poetical or imaginative person, he could not have said what it was in her appearance or attitude that conveyed to him an impression of utter loneliness; but he received that impression, and it gave him a sharp twinge at his heart. As he drew near she said:

‘I wanted to thank you for having come; and I have something to give you. It’s only the little compass that you gave to Micky. I thought perhaps you would like to have it again; he was holding it in his hand when he died, and—and——’

She could not finish her sentence. The tears which she had restrained so long brimmed over her eyelids at last; one of them fell upon Billy's big, sinewy hand, which had gone forth instinctively to clasp hers.

'Oh, my poor dear!' he exclaimed, 'I'm so sorry—so dreadfully sorry! And I can't do anything for you; I can't even say anything!'

She drew her hand away and dried her eyes.

'Nobody can do anything,' she answered gently, 'and there is nothing to be said; but I understand quite well how sorry you are, and I shall never forget you or your kindness to Micky. Perhaps some time or other we shall meet again, and then if you haven't forgotten him—and I don't think you will—we can talk about him together. Just now I couldn't speak of him even to you. Good-bye. The kindest thing you can do for me at present is to leave me alone; and I know you want to be kind.'

He took her at her word; he could not possibly have intruded upon her grief at such a moment

with a renewal of vows to which she had refused to listen in brighter days. But, although his heart ached for her as he left the room, his spirits were lighter on his own account than they had been when he entered it. She had promised that she would never forget him, and she had spoken of meeting him again; surely it was as permissible to assume that her words meant a good deal as that they meant next to nothing.

CHAPTER XIX.

DAISY'S RECOVERY.

EDMUND KIRBY remained at Stratton Park for twenty-four hours longer than the other relations and friends of the family who had attended the funeral ; but he only saw Winifred for a few minutes during that time, and she shed no tears in his presence, as she had done in Billy Bellew's. Edmund had never been Micky's friend, nor was there anything disturbing to the composure in his formally expressed, though doubtless sincere, condolences. It was a result of Edmund's natural temperament that he always expressed himself formally when he was most moved, and there were, besides, reasons of which Winifred knew

nothing for his being even less demonstrative than usual on that occasion.

He had not forgotten his promise to the dead boy, and he was fully purposed to keep it; but he had come to the conclusion that things must be allowed to remain as they were for the present. Apart from Winifred's manifest unfitness to enter upon a prolonged explanation and discussion, he was not yet certain that he would render her any service by setting her free. He was not certain that she loved that man Bellew; he was quite certain that she was not the girl to fall in love with mere physical beauty, and from all that he had heard of his rival he doubted very much whether, even if she did love him, she would consult her own future happiness by marrying one whose habits of life were totally opposed to hers. Moreover, he himself loved her—loved her with all the strength of his calm, concentrated character; and he was at least entitled to pause before relinquishing all that had hitherto lent brightness to a somewhat sunless existence. So, after saying what

seemed to be requisite and appropriate, he went away; and it cannot be truthfully asserted that anybody in the house missed him.

To say that Micky was missed in that sorrow-stricken household is to give a very faint idea of the blank left by the disappearance of its youngest and liveliest inmate. Winifred, whose loss was in reality far greater, and whose grief was likely to prove far more permanent, than that of either of her parents, was the only one who made any effort to pick up the dropped thread of their common life, to resume occupations which must eventually be resumed, and even to affect a cheerfulness which she could not feel. She was rewarded by reproaches, by accusations of heartlessness, by frequent hints that she was herself responsible for the bereavement which had fallen upon the family; but these things scarcely hurt her. When one has broken an arm or leg, one does not grumble about a few additional scratches, and by degrees she attained her object, which was to rouse the old people from their apathy and force them gently

back into their respective grooves. With her sister she had more trouble. Daisy not only refused to be comforted, but refused in an extremely disagreeable manner.

‘Please, don’t let us have any more humbug!’ the girl exclaimed irritably one day; ‘I can stand anything but that. If you don’t know why I should be more miserable than you are, you must be rather dull of comprehension; but of course you do know, and we had better not talk about it! The only thing that would do me the slightest good would be a change; and I suppose there is no chance of our leaving this dreadful, dreary place for months and months to come.’

Personally, Winifred had no desire to leave home, and the usual six or eight weeks’ visit to London during the season was, under the sad circumstances, naturally abandoned; but as the summer went on, her father began to speak of running up for a few days by himself to transact some matters of business and to confer with his political and literary friends, while Mrs. Forbes,

who had fallen into a chronic state of low spirits, evidently stood in need of deliverance from solitude, which was always to her one of the most intolerable of earthly ills. Winifred, therefore, ended by suggesting that the whole family should move to the metropolis; and in the nick of time came the offer, at a nominal rent, of a house in Hans Place from some old friends who had been ordered off to Kissingen, in consequence of having eaten too many dinners.

The offer was accepted, and the Forbeses took possession of their temporary residence towards the fag-end of the season, when every brick and paving-stone in the city was baked through and through, when weary Parliament men were pining for release, and when jaded maids and matrons were beginning to ask themselves whether, after all, the game had been worth the candle. The general stampede had not, however, yet set in; so that Mrs. Forbes was able to see her friends in a quiet way, and her husband could count upon a daily meeting with kindred spirits at the Athenæum.

As for Winifred, she found the loneliness of London a good deal more trying than the loneliness of home. She had nothing to do ; she did not care to see people, nor, it appeared, did anybody particularly care to see her—not even Edmund Kirby, who wrote a short note (all his notes had been short of late, which was quite a new departure) to say that he would call as soon as he could, but that he was very full of work for the moment. Nevertheless, London contained one person who wanted to see her very much indeed, and whose unexpected good fortune it was to encounter her, one afternoon, in Kensington Gardens, where she had been sitting for more than an hour, idly watching the children and the nursemaids.

She greeted him with a faint semblance of her old welcoming smile, and without any of the emotion which caused him to stammer and stutter absurdly.

‘ Oh yes ; I am quite well, thank you,’ she said, in response to his first intelligible inquiry. ‘ We have come up to London for a few weeks, and I

think both my father and my mother are the better for the change already.'

'But *you*,' Billy insisted — 'are you really better?'

'Yes,' she answered a little doubtfully, 'I suppose I am better in one way. I don't mind talking about Micky now, though we hardly ever do talk about him at home. That is the most terrible part of death, isn't it?—that one can't talk naturally or easily about those who are dead, if one has loved them. Nobody can.'

Billy could. Perhaps it was out of his power to speak otherwise than naturally and easily upon any subject; perhaps the intuitive sympathy of love emboldened him to speak of his former pupil in a way which he knew that Winnie would like, although everybody might not have liked it. Be that as it may, he persuaded her without difficulty to sit down on a bench beneath one of the smoke-blackened elm-trees, and for a quarter of an hour she listened to him, and talked to him in an unreserved fashion which certainly did her good.

To no one else had she confided her great trouble—the trouble which beset her day and night—that if she had not allowed her brother to go out fishing that day, he would not have caught the cold which had killed him. Billy, of course, said what every reasonable being would have said in his place; but he was not successful in comforting her.

‘Oh, I quite understand that I am entitled to plead not guilty,’ she replied; ‘but nothing can alter the dreadful fact—nothing! If you had accidentally killed your brother out shooting, you would feel as I do, even though you might know that you had taken all the ordinary precautions.’

After this they sat silent for some minutes, and then she rose, saying that it was time for her to go home. ‘I am so very glad to have seen you,’ she added, ‘and I can’t tell you what a comfort it has been to me to talk about those dear old days that will never come back. I almost always think of you now when I think of my poor Micky.’

She seemed to have so completely put away

from her the memory of the last of those old days that he hardly dared to remind her of it ; but he could not let her go without ascertaining her address and repeating a request which she had not then seen fit to grant.

She was not very much inclined to grant it now ; yet she hardly knew how to refuse. She did not wish to hurt his feelings ; besides which, it would seem a little inconsistent to deny him the privilege of calling in Hans Place after he had stayed several days at Stratton. The sight of her hesitation decided him to mention something which he would have mentioned before, had an opportunity of so doing been accorded to him.

‘I—I’m not quite as good friends with Mrs. Littlewood as I used to be,’ he blurted out, conscious of an uncomfortable increase of colour on his sunburnt cheeks. ‘I left them at Venice, and we didn’t part on the best of terms, and I’ve heard nothing of them since. I—I thought you might like to know,’ he added apologetically.

‘I am very glad, for your sake,’ Winifred said ;

‘I always hoped, you know, that something of this sort would happen sooner or later.’

‘Well, I’m very glad too ; it would be ridiculous to pretend that I’m not. And—and now, I suppose, Mrs. Forbes won’t object to my coming to her house?’

‘No,’ answered Winifred slowly, ‘I don’t think my mother will object ; only I can’t quite promise that she will see you. She has hardly begun to receive visitors yet.’

Billy was upon the point of saying that, if he called in Hans Place, it would not be for the pleasure of seeing Mrs. Forbes ; but he checked himself in time, and he was likewise successful in repressing other injudicious remarks which rose to his lips during the few minutes that elapsed before his companion requested him to call a hansom for her.

Winifred, for her part, could only hope that she had not acted injudiciously. The mischief, after all, had been done, and was irremediable. Daisy would not be any worse off than she already was

for seeing Mr. Bellew again; nay, she might even be better off, since men do change their minds sometimes. Had he not, as a matter of fact, changed his mind about Mrs. Littlewood? It cannot be said that this line of thought, and the speculations arising out of it, were altogether agreeable to Winifred; but she resolutely persevered with them, because she felt that she ought to be ashamed of finding them disagreeable. Why should she grudge her sister an allegiance which had once been offered to herself, but which it had been, and must always be, out of the question for her to accept? There was, of course, no reason why she should thus play the dog-in-the-manger's part, and she determined that she would endeavour henceforth, so far as in her lay, to bring about what was requisite in order to make poor Daisy happy once more. Daisy had been really unhappy for a long time past; latterly, too, she had repelled all attempts at sympathy, and had become extremely reserved in her demeanour towards her sister. 'Reserved' was the charitable term that

Winifred employed, but 'sulky' would have been nearer the truth.

Well, at all events, there was no sulky sound about the ringing laugh which greeted Winifred's startled ear, after she had reached home and was mounting the stairs towards the drawing-room. There are people—Winifred herself was one of them—who can laugh quite well when they are unhappy; but there are others—and to this class Daisy belonged—whose emotions admit of no variety, and who must needs be either merry or melancholy. These last do not sorrow long; but while they do, their sorrow is very apparent indeed. Now, Daisy had been sorrowing for several months without intermission; if, then, she could laugh like that again, it was certain that the tide must have definitely turned. So much the better! The turn of the tide must have come some day, and no sensible person could have wished the girl to mope and mourn longer than she had done. Winifred was not in the least shocked; only she was rather puzzled, because she could not imagine who had

succeeded in effecting so sudden a transformation.

She paused for a moment on the landing. She could hear Daisy's voice in the drawing-room, followed by a deeper and more masculine one; after which there was a second outburst of hilarity. Then she opened the door, and, not a little to her amazement, beheld her sister in the act of tossing lumps of sugar at Harry Lysaght, who, with his right hand behind his back, was catching, or attempting to catch, them in his left. He made a very bad failure with the lump which was thrown towards him when that tall, black figure entered the room; he stood stock-still, smiling feebly, looking extremely red and foolish, and not knowing what to say. But Daisy came to his aid.

'Will you have some tea, Winnie?' she asked calmly. 'I thought you had gone out driving with mamma. Harry made his appearance a short time ago, and he has been teaching me a new game, by way of cheering me up; it isn't a very amusing game, but it's just a shade better than

nothing at all. Our conversation had reached the vanishing-point, you see, when we started it.'

At any rate, it appeared to have answered its purpose. The old Daisy had returned; and what was even more surprising was that Harry also seemed to have returned, upon much the old terms—Harry, who all this time had been absent from home, whose absence had almost avowedly been due to reluctance to meet his former love, and who had not even gone down to Shropshire to attend Micky's funeral. He had written to Winifred at the time, and had said that he hoped she would understand why he felt unable to pay that last tribute of affection and respect in person. It was impossible to suppose that he would have been where he was, or would have conducted himself as he had just been conducting himself, unless advances of a very encouraging kind had been made to him. If such advances had indeed been made again, so much the better. Still, the situation was necessarily embarrassing, and he escaped from it as soon as he decently could.

Winifred did her best to set him at his ease ; but he made her task so difficult for her that she was not at all sorry to see the last of him. He insisted upon pulling a long face and speaking in a subdued voice ; although he did not allude in so many words to the family affliction, he implied that he had not really been forgetful of it, that Daisy's merriment was merely assumed, and that he had only recommended the throwing of lumps of sugar about the room as a measure of temporary alleviation. In short, he was quite as maladroit as it was at all possible to be. When he had departed, Daisy made his excuses and her own, and did so with a better grace than she had shown in her dealings with her sister for some months past.

'I know you must think me a brute, Winnie,' she said ; 'but I can't help it ! I'm not like you ; I can't just sit still and go on bearing things. And time does make a difference. Not to you, perhaps ; but to commonplace wretches like me it does.'

'Of course it makes a difference to anybody,' Winifred answered ; 'the world goes round, and if

we wished ever so much to stand still, we couldn't. I didn't think you a brute at all, and I was only too glad to see Harry Lysaght here, though he was about the last person whom I expected to see. Did you send for him, Daisy ?'

'Well, I wrote him a note and told him he might call if he liked ; I did so want to see somebody young again ! But I didn't send to him in the way that you mean ; please don't jump to headlong conclusions. I told him all along that I had no quarrel with him.'

This artless confession on Daisy's part of her inability to exist without an admirer of some sort or kind was a reassuring symptom ; but it threw additional doubt upon the wisdom of bringing her once more into intimate relations with Billy Bellew. It was, however, indispensable that Winifred should make some mention of her late encounter, so she said :

'Somebody else is coming to see us soon, I believe. I met Mr. Bellew in the Park just now, and he asked whether he might call.'

It was not without trepidation that she spoke ; but the effect of her announcement upon her sister was very far from being what she had anticipated.

‘I was wondering whether he would turn up now or wait a little longer,’ Daisy remarked, with a short laugh. ‘Is it too soon to congratulate you? Anyhow, I beg to offer my congratulations in advance. Don’t roll your eyes at me ; I assure you they are quite sincere.’

‘I don’t know what you are talking about,’ faltered Winifred ; for, indeed, there are occasions when even the most truthful people feel bound to make use of that formula.

‘My dear Winnie, isn’t it about time to drop pretence? You see, I happen to have heard upon the best authority—his own, in fact—that Mr. Bellew proposed to you before he left Algiers. He told me all about it when he was at Stratton, and I believe he rather hoped that I should intercede for him. But intercession is hardly necessary, I presume.’

‘I wish you had not heard of it in that way!’

exclaimed Winifred, much distressed. 'I would have told you at the time, only it seemed best to say nothing. And I am sure you can't really think that I ever had any idea of marrying Mr. Bellew. You know very well that I am engaged to Edmund Kirby.'

'Oh yes; you are engaged to Edmund Kirby—*c'est entendu!* But Edmund Kirby will be very gently and considerately dismissed, and the blow won't kill him; even if he were desperately in love—which he isn't—the blow wouldn't kill him. I ought to be something of an authority upon such subjects, oughtn't I? Well, you see before you a case of complete recovery. I don't know how I came to make such an idiot of myself; most likely I should never have wasted a second thought upon him if he had not begun by snubbing me. Anyhow, he ended as he began, and the last dose was tolerably effectual.'

Winifred gazed earnestly at her sister.

'I hope you are speaking the truth!' she exclaimed half involuntarily.

‘Oh, you may make your mind easy; I am speaking the truth. You’ll admit that I generally do. I haven’t the power of keeping things dark that some people have, though I think I have kept your secret pretty well all this time. Here comes mamma back from her drive. I’ll promise not to let her into your secret until you give me leave, if you’ll promise in return not to reveal my little secret to Mr. Bellew.’

CHAPTER XX.

THE UNWELCOME GUEST.

Busy as Edmund Kirby was, he might very well have spared an hour of his valuable time for a visit to Hans Place; still, he had no great difficulty in persuading himself that circumstances had compelled him to postpone that duty and pleasure from day to day. But when he felt that it could be postponed no longer, he did find very great difficulty in making up his mind what to do or say. The case, to be sure (supposing that it had not been his own case) was one of elementary simplicity. He had only to go straight to Winifred, tell her what he had heard from her brother, and assure her that, if she indeed loved another man, he would never think of holding her to an engagement which

she had entered into at a time when she had had few opportunities of judging what other men were like. Since, however, the case was his own, Edmund could not help allowing weight to reasonable doubts and hesitations. He loved Winifred with all his heart, which, to do him justice, was a warm and steadfast one; he had never loved, or dreamt of loving, anybody else; if he had been undemonstrative, that was partly because it was his nature to be so and partly because he had felt so certain of her affection. Owing to their long betrothal, they had grown to be more like married people than lovers; it was natural that their mutual relations should have become established upon that footing; and it was also natural—so, at least, those who had greater knowledge of such subjects than Edmund Kirby could pretend to affirm—for women to be affected by passing caprices. Does a man surrender his wife when he suspects that she has permitted her fancy to wander from its allegiance for a moment? And would he consult her happiness if he did, or could?

Such self-communings were scarcely consistent with the strict integrity which had hitherto governed all Edmund Kirby's actions, and they failed to bring him any nearer to a decision. His strong inclination was to wait and trust to time ; but his conscience told him that he ought, at all events, to give Winifred a chance of claiming her liberty. That might, perhaps, be managed without any mention being made of Mr. Bellew's name ; the mere fact that he was not yet in a position to fix any date for their marriage would afford her a fair pretext, if she wanted one. Finally, he set forth, without a definite programme, to pay his long-deferred call ; he resolved to be guided by whatever kind of reception might be accorded to him. He was received, as it chanced, by Mrs. Forbes, who soon took occasion to mention that she did not feel up to much talking that day. It had always been Edmund's privilege to bore his prospective mother-in-law intolerably, and she knew him too well to stand upon ceremony with him.

‘ Winifred is with her father, writing from

dictation,' she said. 'I dare say you can see her for a few minutes, if you don't mind going down to the dining-room and ringing the bell.'

He had a craven desire to reply that he would not interrupt Mr. Forbes's literary occupations; but he stifled it, and shortly afterwards the meeting which he had so greatly dreaded had become an accomplished fact. The first thing that struck him, after he had taken note, with concern, of Winifred's pallor, and the dark semicircles beneath her eyes, was that she was really and unmistakably glad to see him again. She held his hand while she sat beside him; she led him on to talk about his work, about his never-ending domestic worries, and about his plans for the approaching holiday season; she was as kind, as sympathetic, as comforting as ever, and perhaps—yes, certainly she was more openly affectionate.

These omens, which some very sagacious persons might not have considered wholly favourable, had a reassuring effect upon Edmund Kirby; still, he could not allow them to divert him from his pur-

pose. It took him rather a long time to explain how, after anxious thought, he had arrived at the conclusion that he ought to release her from her engagement; but he got through his appointed task at last, and, all things considered, he did not perform it so badly. A man who does not deem his actual income sufficient to marry upon, and who can only look forward to a narrow increase in his earnings, ought, no doubt, to say the sort of things that he said: probably also the general run of men who say such things expect the sort of answer that he obtained.

But Edmund, who had not quite ventured to expect it, was overjoyed when it came. Winifred had no thought of deserting him; she was willing to wait for him as long as it might be necessary (possibly, if she had spoken her whole thought, she might have said the longer the better); she declared, with a smile, that she should continue to look upon him as her affianced husband, unless he wished to throw her over, and she begged him never to doubt her again.

But she did not ask him whether he had any special reason for doubting her ; she did not tell him that she had met Mr. Bellew ; nor, during an interview which her duty to her father obliged her to curtail, did she make a single reference to Micky. The above omissions were somewhat significant, and it was perhaps fortunate that ignorance and pre-occupation prevented Edmund from noticing them. He went away, promising to come again as soon as he could, and telling himself that he had now faithfully obeyed the voice of conscience.

It was on the following afternoon that Harry Lysaght, dropping in about tea-time, found the three ladies at home, and was greeted in a very friendly manner by them all. Mrs. Forbes's welcome in particular was so warm as to be almost enthusiastic. She had, of course, heard of his previous visit, she had drawn natural conclusions from that circumstance and from Daisy's recovered cheerfulness ; her own cheerfulness had in a great measure been restored, and she had said to her elder daughter :

‘One can’t be thankful enough that Harry Lysaght has such a forgiving disposition. The whole thing will come on again now, you will see, and I hope and trust we shall hear no more of that wretched Bellew creature.’

One consequence of this speech was that Winifred abstained from distressing her mother by mentioning her encounter with Mr. Bellew in Kensington Gardens, and another was that she gave private instructions to the butler not to admit that gentleman if he should call. It was the best plan, she thought—the only plan. He would be hurt, perhaps, and she herself would be sorry to miss seeing him again; but there was no help for it. Some day, when Daisy should be safely married, or perhaps when her own marriage should be a thing of the past, they might meet once more and talk over old days without harm or danger; but for the present such talks could not safely be indulged in. She had to admit that they could not safely be indulged in, although she avoided a too close scrutiny of reasons.

But we are all of us at the mercy of accidents, and Mr. Forbes's butler happened just then to be very much at the mercy of a neighbouring house-keeper to whom he was paying his addresses. Thus it came to pass that, after having carried the tea up to the drawing-room, he deserted the post of duty in order to slip round the corner for a few minutes, and thus the uninformed footman, answering the door-bell in his absence, solemnly announced Mr. Bellew to a dismayed coterie. Winifred caught her breath; Mrs. Forbes gave utterance to a subdued but perfectly audible exclamation of annoyance; Harry Lysaght glared savagely at the intruder; only Daisy retained her self-command and smiled with mingled amiability and amusement.

As for Billy, who could not but perceive that his entrance was inopportune, he behaved quite irreproachably. He did not seem to notice anything; he shook hands with everybody, including Harry Lysaght, whose salutation was scarcely that of a friend; he sat down, took the cup of tea which Daisy offered him and at once set to work to make

polite conversation. The truth was that he did not care in the least whether any of them, except Winnie, were glad to see him or not; and Winnie had given him leave to call. Nevertheless, it was obviously expedient that he should cut short his present visit. The freezing civility of Mrs. Forbes and Lysaght's undisguised irritation were hardly atoned for by the gracious vivacity with which Daisy responded to his remarks, and, although Winifred tried to make the best of an awkward business, she said little and was visibly disconcerted.

Mrs. Forbes took advantage of the inevitable pause which soon supervened, to say, without addressing herself to anybody in particular: 'It is extraordinary that such a number of people should be still left in London. One thought, and rather hoped, that everybody, except members of Parliament and business men, would have gone away by this time. Not that it matters very much to us; for of course we are only seeing a

few very old friends—unless the servants make a mistake, as they sometimes do.’

After that, it only remained for a visitor who had been admitted by mistake to retreat as speedily and gracefully as might be. This Billy did soon after he had swallowed his tea and had declined a second cup, comforting himself with the reflection that it would not, in any case, have been worth his while to protract a dialogue which included so many participants. He was, however, conscious of a feeling of discouragement and disappointment as he walked away. It was now quite clear that Mrs. Forbes would have nothing to say to him if she could help it; there had been a disquieting suggestion of sarcasm about Daisy’s amenities; he could not help doubting whether Winnie herself had really wished or intended him to take advantage of the permission that he had obtained from her. And why in the world had Lysaght been so abominably uncivil? One could understand the fellow having been silly enough to be jealous out in Algiers; but he must know very well by this time

that there had never been the slightest ground for such jealousy.

Mr. Lysaght appeared, as if in answer to these musings, to speak for himself. He must have been tolerably expeditious about taking his leave, and he must have run from Hans Place to Piccadilly; for he was a short-legged man, and Billy Bellew habitually covered nearly as much ground in one stride as he did in two. As a matter of fact, he seemed to be a little out of breath.

‘I thought I would catch you up if I could, Bellew,’ he explained; ‘I want to have a word or two with you. It’s rather unpleasant, of course; but it would be still more unpleasant, I think, if we didn’t come to some sort of an understanding.’

‘About what?’ inquired Billy somewhat shortly.

‘Well, about your visiting the Forbeses. To speak candidly, I don’t like it, and I don’t call it quite fair. If they wanted you, nobody would have a right to complain; but, since they don’t want you—and you yourself must have seen this afternoon that they did not want you—is it very good

form to thrust yourself upon them? They can't very well slam the door in your face, you see.'

'I should have thought they could; but I certainly don't wish to thrust myself upon anybody. Are you commissioned to tell me that I'm not wanted?'

'Oh, no; I'm speaking entirely on my own hook; but there can't be much doubt of the fact. That is, as regards three of the family. Unfortunately, I can't be so positive about the fourth.'

'H'm! And what business is it of yours, if one may ask?' inquired Billy, who quite mistook his interlocutor's drift.

'I suppose you know what took me to Algiers,' returned Harry, with an embarrassed laugh; 'I dare say you know, too, why I left in such a hurry, and you can probably guess what my—my hopes still are. All that doesn't entitle me to interfere with you or dictate to you, you may say. Perhaps it doesn't; but I may venture to call myself a friend of the family, and, for the matter of that, I

thought a few months ago that I might venture to call myself a friend of yours.'

'My dear fellow,' said Billy, in something more like his customary good-humoured accents, 'I'm sure I never wished to be anything except a friend to you. It was no fault of mine if you chose to take it into your head that I was your enemy.'

'Well, that's just what I thought, and that's why I followed you just now. It can't trouble or inconvenience you much to leave London at this time of year, and if you would only go away, you would do a real service to more persons than one. I'll speak more plainly, if you insist upon it; but it is not over and above pleasant even to speak as plainly as this, and I take it that you understand what I mean.'

Billy stroked his chin reflectively. 'Yes, I understand,' he answered; 'and it so happens that I have arranged to start on a yachting cruise with another fellow in a few days. I was rather thinking of crying off; but after what you've said, I don't know that I will. Perhaps, after all, I

oughtn't to intrude upon them while they are in such deep mourning. Of course it's different for you.'

'Exactly so,' agreed Harry eagerly; 'it really is different—I stand upon quite another footing.'

'Yes. But mind you, Lysaght, I'm not promising to drop their acquaintance. That I will never do until she—until they tell me in so many words that they don't want to know me any more. I shall certainly try to see them again in the autumn.'

'Oh, it will be all right by then; there won't be the slightest objection to your seeing them in the autumn,' returned Harry, with an alacrity which rather surprised the other; 'it's only just for the present that they'd rather you left them alone. Well, I'm awfully obliged to you, Bellew, and I'm sorry I was so beastly rude while you were sitting there at tea; I hope you'll overlook it. And I say, Bellew, my place isn't far from Stratton, you know; so if you cared to come down for a few days' covert-shooting towards the end of the year, I should be only too glad to put you up.'

It was difficult to reconcile this sudden outburst of cordiality with the speaker's previous assertions and implications; but the effect of it was to send Billy off to his club in greatly improved spirits. 'I've been in too great a hurry, that's what it is,' he mused. 'And, when you come to think of it, that's pretty much what the old lady gave me to understand. I don't suppose she's particularly fond of me, anyhow, though she used to be amiable enough at one time. So I must sail for the Hebrides or the Orkneys, or wherever it is. I wonder whether that beggar will tell them where I've gone, and why I've gone.'

This seemed, upon further reflection, to be so uncertain that Billy at length resolved to take the liberty of inditing a few lines to Winifred. The subjoined composition, notwithstanding its brevity, was the outcome of much thought, and a profligate expenditure of club notepaper :

'MY DEAR MISS FORBES,

'I dare say you may have heard from Lysaght that I am starting in a day or two on a

yachting cruise, and I suppose there is no hope of my seeing you again before I sail. From what Lysaght said, and from your mother's manner this afternoon, I am afraid she was not best pleased with me for forcing my way into your house at a time when you are not receiving visitors; but *you* know, though she doesn't, that all your troubles are my troubles, and that I am not heartless and forgetful; so I am sure I need not apologise to you.

'There are other things which I should like to say if I dared; but perhaps it is better not. Only I want you to believe that, whatever happens, and wherever I may be, I shall be

'Always and only yours,

'W. BELLEW.'

Billy, after reading over the final copy of this missive, thought that it was not so bad; and in truth it might have been worse. It elicited a prompt and very kindly reply, in which Winifred contrived to show that she appreciated his delicacy and forbearance, while abstaining from any allusion

to the things which he had left unsaid. She herself left a good deal unsaid; for she did not wish to give him pain, and it seemed unnecessary to repeat what he already knew, or to rebuke him for subscribing himself after a fashion which only Edmund Kirby had the right to use.

With her letter in his pocket, and some unjustifiable hopes in his heart, Billy set out for Southampton to join his friend's yacht. Mrs. Forbes is now kind enough to say that he behaved very like a gentleman in taking himself off at what might have proved to be a critical moment. Mrs. Forbes it is true, does not know, and never will know, what were the real motives of his gentlemanlike conduct on that occasion; but even if she were informed of them, she would probably continue to speak well of Billy Bellew, who has, indeed, given her the best of all reasons for speaking well of him.

CHAPTER XXI.

CHANGES.

BILLY BELLEW's abrupt disappearance from the scene was the solution of a difficulty, and, as such, was doubtless a subject for thankfulness; yet one may deplore many events which one would not cancel, if one had the power; and Winifred permitted herself some occasional moments of self-pity in that she was now severed from the only human being to whom she could speak openly of her great sorrow. Every day that sorrow was becoming less keen and less present to those about her, more and more did they show a disposition to relegate it to the background, to treat it as the friends of a man who is afflicted with some mortal

disease are wont to treat his malady. Such things cannot be forgotten, but it is considered to be both cruel and in bad taste to make mention of them. This is the common fate of the dead ; at first they are not talked about, because it is too painful to talk about them ; as time goes on they are forgotten, because their names have ceased to be familiar.

Moreover, other and more cheerful topics of conversation inevitably arise : such as, for instance, the immense and unlooked-for consolation which had been granted to Mrs. Forbes by Harry Lysaght's return and Daisy's welcome of him. There was never any counting upon Daisy ; still, it did not seem unreasonable to believe that she had at last made up her mind to accept her long-suffering wooer, and now that Mr. Bellew had, by the mercy of Heaven, been removed, a fond mother might fairly hope that no further complications would present themselves. Harry Lysaght himself entertained the same hope, basing it upon the same ground, of which he made no secret in talking matters over

with Winifred. As soon as he found out that she was not too engrossed by her personal grief to listen to him, he reinstated her in her old position as his confidant, and frankly confessed to her that it was he who had persuaded Billy to vanish into space.

‘The fact was,’ said he, ‘that I couldn’t feel safe—not that I do feel safe yet, but I mean that I couldn’t feel anything like safe while he was hanging about. We might have had all the old trouble over again. Out of sight is out of mind. It isn’t that she cares for him, but that she can’t resist trying to make him care for her, don’t you see. And I suppose she rather enjoys torturing me too. However, I’m almost sure it will be all right now.’

Winifred remembered that her sister had once described Harry Lysaght as not being proud, and certainly he seemed to deserve that character. Humility is a virtue ; but there is such a thing as carrying it to outrageous lengths.

‘I do hope,’ she exclaimed apprehensively, ‘that you didn’t tell Mr. Bellew what you were afraid of ! Even if you didn’t mind his knowing for your own

sake, you ought to have remembered that you had no right to betray Daisy.'

'My dear Winifred, there wasn't anything to betray; you don't suppose that Daisy was ever in love with the man, do you? Well, you needn't laugh; I know I did suppose so for a time; but it was natural enough for me to make a mistake. However, all I said to Bellew was that you none of you wanted to see him just now, and that I didn't think it very good form on his part to force himself upon you. I put it upon your being in mourning, you know—and all that. He quite saw it, and he gave in almost immediately. Bellew is really an awfully good fellow, though perhaps he's a bit dense.'

Happily, Billy Bellew was not the only person treated of in the present narrative who possessed that thrice-blessed quality of density. From the moment that his potential rival was removed from his path Harry Lysaght ceased to be jealous of him, and it may be doubted whether, up to the present time of writing, he has ever divined that he once had most

legitimate cause for jealousy. His second courtship progressed smoothly and swiftly in the seclusion of the house in Hans Place, whither no other male visitor of less than sixty years of age ever penetrated; he was secure from those anxieties which Daisy might have amused herself by inflicting upon him, had she had the chance; and before London was quite empty that city contained at least one perfectly happy man.

It was all very satisfactory, of course, and Winifred was glad that her sister had at last chosen the man whom she ought to have chosen at first; but it was difficult to share Mrs. Forbes's exultation or to stifle certain misgivings. These, however, Daisy, as soon as she perceived their existence, kindly made haste to allay.

'I know what you're thinking about,' said she to her sister; 'but you really needn't distress yourself any longer on that score. Everybody has these little attacks, though everybody doesn't own to them, as I did; and everybody is cured who gets such a douche of cold water as I have had thrown

over me. Truly and honestly, I like Harry much better than Mr. Bellew. Besides, I doubt whether it is a good plan to start by being passionately in love with your husband.'

'I don't know of any better plan,' observed Winifred doubtfully.

'Yet you propose to marry Edmund Kirby! At least, you say you do, and you have cheerfully sent off Mr. Bellew on a yachting cruise, without so much as inquiring who his shipmates are to be. Well, I suppose you know your own business best; but I should have thought that was rather a dangerous experiment to try. People who go off yachting in unknown company sometimes forget to come back again.'

Daisy only laughed, and was avowedly incredulous, when she was assured that, if Winnie ever married at all, it would be Edmund Kirby, not Mr. Bellew, who would stand beside her at the altar; but she promised to keep her convictions on that subject to herself, and to respect a secret which could hardly be said to belong to her. Probably

she was not very anxious to proclaim how completely she had mistaken the meaning of Billy's attentions in Algiers; probably, also, she had little attention to spare from matters of more urgent and personal importance to her than her sister's ultimate destiny. For she had yielded to Harry's earnest entreaties, and had consented to fix an early date for their wedding. The ceremony must, of necessity, be a very quiet affair; but she was determined that her trousseau should be in all respects worthy of a rich man's wife, and there was not too much time in which to provide it.

It was not until the middle of August that the dressmakers and milliners released their open-handed customer, and the wreaths which had been left upon Micky's grave were withered and brown long before Winifred could return to replace them with fresh ones. Then, after a few weeks, during which Harry rode or drove over to Stratton every day, and helped by his cheerful presence to dispel the gloom which still clung to the house, the wedding was solemnised in the same little church

which, not so long before, had witnessed a more mournful rite, attended by very nearly the same people. Mrs. Forbes and Winifred laid aside their black dresses for the day, but resumed them on the morrow; resuming also, as was indeed inevitable, their interrupted melancholy. Mrs. Forbes was rejoiced to think that Daisy was well and happily married; but as soon as the excitement was over, she relapsed into a state of depression and fretfulness from which it was no easy task to rouse her.

Winifred had to undertake that task, and accomplished it with more or less of success. She had plenty of leisure to devote to it in those days; for her father was allowing contemporary literature a brief respite, and Edmund Kirby was, by her advice, and in compliance with her request, spending a well-earned holiday in the Alps. Edmund had at first been reluctant to leave England, but had ended by agreeing with her that, since his brother would not receive him, and since he had not been invited to take up his quarters at Stratton Park, the best thing he could do was to

recruit exhausted nature by a change of air and scene. He had been sorry to part from her; but he had not been afraid. The confidence which he reposed in her was unbounded; she had told him that he must never doubt her again, and he did not doubt her; even after he heard that Mr. Bellew had called in Hans Place he felt no uneasiness. He had distinctly offered her her freedom, and she had as distinctly refused to listen to his offer; it followed, as a matter of course, that poor little Micky had been entirely misled as to her supposed change of sentiments.

Winifred was all the more touched by his faith in her loyalty because, do what she would, she could not always keep herself from doubting whether she wholly deserved it, and because she suspected that some rumour about her and Mr. Bellew must have reached his ears. In answering his letters, which were now as numerous and as prolix as of yore, she was careful not to vex him by reporting rumours which had reached not only her ears, but those of everybody else in the county.

John Kirby's excesses had arrived at such a pitch that it was becoming a serious question with the county magnates whether some public notice would not have to be taken of them. If the man would have been satisfied with being carried to bed drunk every night, an infirmity which, after all, chiefly concerned himself might have been ignored ; but the mischief of it was that he must needs stagger scandalously through the streets of the market-town in broad daylight, that he insisted upon taking his place on the bench beside brother magistrates who did not care to be seen speaking to him, and that, when there, he was apt to conduct himself in a manner calculated to bring contempt upon the whole class of the great unpaid. For the time being he was ill with what was believed to be his third attack of *delirium tremens* ; but he had such an iron constitution that he was pretty sure to be as well as ever again ere long.

Such, at least, was the despondent expectation of the neighbouring county gentlemen ; but Dr. Hale, who was of a different opinion, rode over to Stratton

Park one day to ask for Edmund Kirby's exact address.

'Mrs. Kirby doesn't seem to know where he is,' the doctor explained to Winifred, when she had been sent for in order that she might supply the required information; 'and they ought to telegraph for him. His brother may die at any moment.'

'Is it so bad as that?' asked Winifred, a good deal shocked and startled.

'Well, it's like that; I don't know whether you can call it bad. One is sorry that any man should die in such a way; but one can't feel sorry to think that the world will soon be rid of him, and that he will be replaced by a steady, respectable fellow. Edmund has worked hard, and he has good abilities; but luck hasn't favoured him so far. When he succeeds to the property we may hope to see him distinguish himself; he ought to have no difficulty about getting into Parliament, I should say.'

So decisive an opinion, coming from so com-

petent an authority, gave Winifred food for reflection. If John Kirby was really going to die and Edmund was about to become a comparatively rich man, it followed that certain contingencies which had hitherto appeared to be remote must now be regarded as imminent; and she was not quite prepared to face them. During the next few days she searched her heart and conscience more closely than she had ever done before, with results which were not, upon the whole, satisfactory to her. She was very much afraid that she would have to tell Edmund something which she did not at all want to tell him, and which she had not, until that moment, plainly admitted to herself. It was not, perhaps, very important—she felt almost sure that it was not important—still, there it was, and as matters stood she was bound in honour to make her statement. Later on there might not be the same necessity; if only John Kirby would get well again, and live for a few more years, bygones might very well be treated as bygones. Probably she was the only human being, with the exception

of poor old Mrs. Kirby, who prayed fervently for the recovery of that reprobate.

But prayer, as all divines are agreed, is of doubtful utility when the motives which prompt it are purely selfish, and that may have been one reason why no miracle was wrought in John Kirby's case. By the time that his brother had returned post-haste from the Continent, he was suffering from a complication of maladies against which medical skill was powerless ; so that Edmund, who found his way to Stratton Park on the day succeeding that of his arrival, could only report that there was nothing more to be done. Edmund was distressed and worried, and even a little remorseful (for, indeed, he had never been too tender in his treatment of the dying man) ; but he expressed in somewhat warmer language than usual the joy that it gave him to be once more within sight and hearing of Winifred, and although, of course, he said nothing about it, she perceived that the idea which had occurred to her had likewise suggested itself to him. He had spent a

great many years in the wilderness; it was but natural that he should be eager to cross the frontier of the Promised Land.

According to him, John was not in immediate danger, though recovery was impossible; the doctor had spoken of a week or ten days; but the struggle might be still further protracted. 'In any case,' he said, 'I hope to run over and see you again to-morrow, for I can be of no use at home, unfortunately, and my mother seems to prefer being left to herself.'

However, he did not return on the morrow, because John Kirby died that night, and the news of what had occurred reached Stratton Park soon after breakfast the next morning. Mrs. Forbes, who conveyed it to her daughter, was not restrained by any false feeling of delicacy from congratulating her upon the vast improvement thus brought about in Edmund's fortunes.

'He really will be quite well off,' she said. 'One can't expect that he will inherit any ready money, but I fancy that he must have laid by something.'

Naturally, he will give up his profession now, and I should think he would wish to be married as soon as possible. I am so glad for your sake, Winnie dear. It was becoming quite a Jacob and Rachel business.'

'Oh, but we haven't in the least minded waiting,' answered Winifred quickly; 'and I am sure we are neither of us in a hurry now. He will have a great many arrangements to make before he can settle down to his new life, and—and I think I am of some little use at home, am I not?'

This plea for delay would have been recognised as very cogent a twelvemonth before; in fact, it was just because her eldest daughter was in the habit of taking housekeeping and all other small daily worries off her hands that Mrs. Forbes had acquiesced in that interminable engagement. But times were changed now, and she proceeded amiably and relentlessly to cut the ground from beneath the suppliant's feet.

'My dear,' said she, with a sigh, 'you have been most useful; I can't think how we should ever have

got on without you—while there were four of us. The time has at last come, though, for you to think a little of yourself. I have been talking things over with your father, and he quite agrees with me that it would be too miserable for us to go on living here, deprived of all our children. We think of letting the place for a few years and travelling abroad. Perhaps when the cold weather sets in we may go back to Algiers for the winter. It suited your father very well last year, and we should find a few friends there, which is always an inducement. My own idea is that much the best plan would be for you and Edmund to be quietly married before we start—say in November.'

To go back to Algiers for the winter! Winifred started and shuddered at such a suggestion. How could her mother bear the thought of returning to a place where every familiar sight and sound and scent must revive the memory of what they had lost? For herself, she felt that she could not do it. Rather than that, she would marry Edmund Kirby the next day; rather—far rather—would

she die. She merely remarked, by way of reply, that no doubt it would be good for them all to leave home for a time, and so fell to wondering why she should, even in thought, have bracketed her marriage and her death as two alternatives only comparatively preferable to the tortures of memory with which she had been threatened. Because she was really very fond of Edmund, and she knew that his wife would be fortunate among women. To be sure, there was that disagreeable confession which it would be her duty to make to him before the date of their wedding could be appointed.

Presently Mrs. Forbes, who was toasting her toes before the fire—for the autumn mornings were chilly—looked up from the weekly paper which she was perusing to say :

‘Dear me! Mr. Bellew has been upon the point of death with typhoid fever. Now that he can’t give us any more trouble, one feels free to be sorry for him, poor fellow! Not so much on account of his illness, since it seems that he is getting better,

as because that dreadful Littlewood woman has been nursing him, they say. Of course she will have a double hold over him now. How shocking it is that these things should be talked about, and even commented upon in print, without a word of disapproval! Society has certainly changed very much for the worse since my young days, and I do think that one of the most discreditable signs of the times is the circulation of these so-called society papers.'

Mrs. Forbes held out the journal in question, of which she was a constant and attentive reader, to her daughter, whose eye was at once caught by the following paragraph :

'The dangerous illness of the popular "Billy" Bellew has caused widespread regret and anxiety. He is still lying at the shooting-box of his friend Mr. Maxwell, in Aberdeenshire, where he was seized with the attack of typhoid fever which so nearly terminated his career. But the latest reports are very reassuring, and we may hope to see Billy winning fresh laurels in the pigskin when the

great steeplechasing events of the coming season are decided. He himself, it is said, attributes his escape from the jaws of death solely to the unwearied attentions of his old friend Mrs. Littlewood, who has been with him throughout his illness, and who has steadfastly refused to resign her post in the sick-room at the bidding of trained nurses.'

Winifred laid down the paper, remarking calmly:

'Yes; it is a pity that Mrs. Littlewood was in the house at the time; as you say, he can hardly hope to shake off her hold upon him now. And I should think his life would have been quite as safe in the hands of a trained nurse as in hers.'

Soon afterwards she rose and left the room. If she shed a few tears in private, that did not prove much; had she not wept once before in Algiers, on less provocation? Billy had not then sworn that he loved her, and her only; nor had he assured her that he had finally broken with Mrs. Littlewood. It was true that she did not wish him to remain faithful to his vows; still, it did seem very

sad that he should have fallen back into his old servitude. Moreover, women always find something especially pathetic in the thought of a strong man being laid low. And Micky had been so fond of him; and she herself was very much attached to him, both for Micky's sake and for his own. Upon the whole, Winifred could have brought forward many excellent and convincing excuses for her tears.

CHAPTER XXII.

A FULL CONFESSION.

‘THE late John Kirby,’ remarked Mr. Forbes, ‘was not a man whom it was possible to regard with any of that respect or esteem which I might be wrongly supposed to have entertained for him, were I to attend his funeral in person. Of the dead it has long been agreed by common consent that nothing but good shall be spoken; yet even in the case of those who have passed, as it were, out of our jurisdiction, it is inexpedient to pay honour where no honour is due, and I fear that the fact of my presence in the churchyard to-morrow would be liable to misconstruction. However, we will send the carriage.’

These sentiments, when rendered into less beautiful language, simply meant that Mr. Forbes was not going to expose himself to the risk of catching cold for the sake of a disreputable ruffian, whose demise was a boon to the community in general and to the Forbes family in particular. Somewhat similar views must have been held by the neighbouring nobility and gentry ; for although a long line of carriages followed the imposing hearse which bore John Kirby's body to the grave, they were all of them empty ; and perhaps the tenantry only attended in such large numbers from a sense of duty to the new squire and a not unnatural wish to start well with him. The obsequies were conducted with much pomp and at considerable expense, Edmund being a great stickler for the due observance of use and wont in such matters. The same sense of respect for traditional customs led him to remain indoors, with all the blinds drawn down, until one more coffin had been added to the row in the family vault ; but on the following day he thought there could be no harm in his betaking

himself to Stratton Park, where his advent was fully expected.

It was partly because she felt quite certain of his putting in an appearance that afternoon that Winifred left the house soon after luncheon and wandered down through the garden towards the park. He would see her mother, and if he should wish to follow her, it would be easy enough for him to do so ; but there was a chance—just the ghost of a chance—that he might be content to postpone their meeting to another day ; and although Winifred was no coward, she was not exempt from that desire to stave off the inevitable as long as possible which is common to frail humanity. However, she did not think very much about Edmund Kirby after she had set out on her walk. It was one of those soft, still autumn days, the beauty and the melancholy of which are peculiarly English. Although the sun was shining, the prevailing tints of the landscape were a silvery grey ; a thin haze blurred the outlines of the trees and hung over the fields and the low hills ; the foliage was changing, a few

dead leaves were already fluttering to the ground, and the grass was still wet with yesterday's dew. The annual death of Nature had not yet come ; but forebodings of its approach were in the air. That death would of course be succeeded by the annual resurrection ; but it seemed to Winifred that there could never be any more spring or summer for her. It was over—quite over and done with—that dear old life, which had had its little worries, but through which there had always run an undercurrent of youth and felicity. Never again would Micky play truant ; never again would she pursue him breathlessly through the stable-yard, and away down to the muddy home-covert ; never again would she ride with him to see the hounds meet ; never again would the sound of his shrill young voice call her from her accounts or her copying work. The whole atmosphere was heavy with the weight of that eternal, pitiless silence. Oh, no ! her mother was right ; life at poor old Stratton had become impossible.

She visited a dozen familiar spots, every one of

which spoke to her of Micky, telling herself that to her dying day she would not, if she could help it, visit them again: she wanted to see them to say good-bye, that was all. During the remainder of the time that must elapse before she quitted the home of her childhood for ever, she would only leave the house to go out driving with her mother or to walk down to the village. Finally, she reached the shore of the lake which had been the innocent cause of so much sorrow, and stood for a while beside the rotting boathouse, gazing at the smooth, grey surface of the water. The boat, which had only been secured by a chain from the stern, had floated out from the shelter and was in need of baling; there was a tin bait-box on one of the seats and a spare line lay near it. Probably nobody had approached the spot since that fatal day, so many months ago, when Micky had left it, bearing his fish-basket with him in triumph. Winifred stooped down, grasped the chain, and was drawing the boat towards her, when a voice from behind her back said:

‘Can I help you?’

She turned her sad, pale face towards the tall man in black clothes, whose appearance did not startle her, and answered :

‘I wanted to get hold of that little bait-box. I think Micky must have forgotten it and left it there.’

Edmund soon secured that treasure, and handed it to her without a word. He was full of sorrow and sympathy for her ; but, not knowing what to say, he held his peace, like the sensible man that he was ; and so for a brief space there was silence. He broke it at length by remarking :

‘I have just had a long chat with your mother. She tells me that Mr. Forbes thinks of letting the place and going abroad for a time. It sounds like a wise plan.’

‘Oh yes ; it is the only plan,’ agreed Winifred. ‘I didn’t think of it until she mentioned it ; but I see now that we couldn’t have stayed on here. We should have all learnt to hate it ; and that would have been too dreadful.’

‘It is natural that you should have such a feeling,’ said Edmund; ‘but I hope you don’t mean that the whole neighbourhood has become distasteful to you. For your parents to leave England is all very well, but my home—our home—must be in Shropshire now, and I am afraid it will be my clear duty to inhabit it for eight or nine months of the year.’

‘Oh, of course.’

‘And your mother thinks,’ Edmund went on, ‘that it would be better for you not to accompany them when they start on their travels. She thinks that if you and I were quietly married before then, nobody could accuse us, under the circumstances, of a want of proper feeling; and she says, truly enough, that, as your sister’s wedding has taken place since—since your trouble, there is no real reason why yours should not. I do not think it at all likely that my own mother would raise any objection; she, too, speaks of going South for change and rest.’ He added, after a short pause: ‘I don’t like the idea of hurrying you, and you

shall not be hurried if you dislike it ; but at least there is no harm, I hope, in my telling you what I should wish.'

He spoke in an apologetic tone, and was evidently prepared for opposition ; but he met with none.

'I don't want to go abroad,' Winifred said, 'and I quite think, as you and mamma do, that if we are married without any fuss or rejoicings, we shall not be called heartless. Besides, I don't know that it would so very much matter if we were.'

She came to a full stop here ; but as Edmund was beginning to speak, she interrupted him by adding :

'Only there is something that I must tell you before I marry you. It is a rather disagreeable thing to have to say, and perhaps—I don't know—perhaps, after you have heard it, you may not wish to marry me at all. Still, I am sure that it ought to be said.'

'I also have something to tell you,' Edmund observed ; 'and it is so disagreeable to me to mention it that I have put off doing so longer than,

perhaps, I ought to have done. But we shall both feel better when we have relieved our minds. Will you begin, or shall I ?

‘Oh, I will speak first, please,’ answered Wini-fred, with a faint smile. ‘What I have to say will be soon said. You remember my telling you, after we came back from Algiers, about Daisy and Mr. Bellew ? Well, I didn’t tell you the whole truth then. If I had, I should have told you that Mr. Bellew made me an offer of marriage just before he left. I was utterly taken by surprise ; I had never supposed that he was thinking of anything of the kind, and I honestly believe that I had never been anything more than friendly with him.’

Edmund nodded, and looked as if he expected her to continue. Evidently she had neither astonished nor angered him, so far.

‘Did you know of this, then ?’ she asked.

‘Yes ; I knew that Bellew had proposed to you and had been refused ; I will tell you presently how I came to hear of it. But that was not all you had to say, was it ?’

Winifred sighed.

‘No, not quite all,’ she answered. ‘Mr. Bellew was here for a few days in the spring, as you know, but I scarcely saw him or spoke to him, and it was only by the merest chance that I met him afterwards, one day, in London. Then we did talk for a long time about Micky—you know how fond Micky was of him?—but we didn’t speak of—of other things. Only I understood that he had not changed. A day or two later he called in Hans Place, but mamma snubbed him and Harry Lysaght was jealous of him, so he went off yachting. I have not seen him since.’

‘But you have wished to see him?’

‘I don’t think I have—not in the way that you mean. I suppose in one sense I shall always wish to see him, because there is nobody else in the world who seems to me like a sort of link with Micky. But in reality I shall go out of my way to avoid meeting him ; for—oh, how shall I make you understand !’

‘My dear,’ said Edmund gently, ‘it is not

difficult to understand, though I dare say it is difficult for you to explain. I will try to make it a little easier. What I had to say to you—and perhaps I ought to have said it before now—was this: You remember that poor little Micky was very anxious to speak to me during his last illness. We thought then, you know, that he had taken a turn for the better and was getting well again; but he himself must have felt some doubts, for he told me that, in case of our never meeting again, he wished me to know what had occurred in Algiers. His impression was that you had only refused Mr. Bellew because you considered yourself bound by your engagement to me, and he asked me to promise that I would release you from that engagement. Of course I could not comply with such a request upon the spur of the moment, and without having satisfied myself that I ought to do so; but I did promise that you should never marry me against your will. Afterwards in London, as you will recollect, I offered to set you free, though I did not mention all the reasons that I had for thinking

that freedom might be welcome to you. I should have gone on to mention them, I hope, if your reply had been less decided; but as it was, I believed what I wanted to believe, and took it for granted that Micky had made a mistake. I couldn't feel quite easy in my mind, though, and I meant to tell you to-day about that interview that I had with him. Now, my dear Winnie, I know as well as possible what your goodness and unselfishness have made you resolve to do; but it wouldn't really be a right thing, or even a kind thing, to marry me when your heart belongs to another man. You would be treating me badly if you did that; you aren't treating me badly by giving me pain which you can't help now, and I suppose you could no more help loving that other man than I could help loving you.'

'But I don't!—I don't!' exclaimed Winifred, who was not misled by the above unemotional speech, and who knew how great an effort it had cost Edmund Kirby to make it. 'What I thought you ought to be told—what I wanted you to under-

stand—but I almost despair of making you or anybody else understand it!—was not that I care for Mr. Bellew more than I do for you, but only that, if everything had been different, I might perhaps have loved him.'

Her pale face flushed all over, and she lowered her eyelids.

'There!' she murmured, 'now I have told the truth and the whole truth. If, after that confession, you still wish me to be your wife, I will marry you as willingly as I would have done at any time during all these years. More willingly, indeed, for I have no home duties now.'

Edmund looked puzzled. He was not a man who understood, or particularly wanted to understand, fine gradations of sentiment. He wanted to do what was right and straightforward, and it appeared to him that there should be no splitting of hairs upon so important a question as that of marriage.

'I may be dull of comprehension,' he said, 'but you don't convince me that you are not in reality

in love with Bellew. You say you will go out of your way to avoid him; you say that you might have loved him if everything had been different; doesn't all that mean that you would have allowed yourself to love him if you had not been engaged to me?'

'No, it doesn't mean that, Edmund. I wasn't thinking only of my engagement when I spoke of things being different; I was thinking of him, too. He would have to be different—very different indeed from what he is—before I could love him.'

Edmund's brow cleared a little.

'Well,' he remarked, 'it is true that Bellew's tastes are quite unlike yours, and I can hardly imagine you leading the kind of life that he leads. Not that there is any harm in it, and I don't wish to sneer at racing and hunting men, who are at least very superior to loafers; only you have never been accustomed to think and talk about nothing but horses.'

Winifred smiled. 'I should certainly be a fish

out of water at Melton or Newmarket,' said she ;
' but that was not quite what I meant. I meant that Mr. Bellew, good and kind-hearted as he is, and thoroughly manly in some ways, is not manly in others. Perhaps it is just because he is so good and kind-hearted that he is so lamentably weak. You won't have forgotten what I told you about him and Mrs. Littlewood. She is not at all a nice woman : he wanted to shake himself free of her, and before I had any suspicion that he cared for me, I used to try and induce him to screw up his courage to the sticking-point. But he never could. She made him ridiculous in Algiers ; it was she who dragged him ostentatiously away from the place, in spite of his reluctance. In London he assured me that he had broken with her finally ; yet it seems that when he was taken ill in Scotland a short time ago, he made haste to send for her. Mamma showed me a paragraph in a newspaper, which said that he ascribed his recovery to her careful nursing. Do you understand any better now ?'

If he did not, he at all events thought that he did. There was nothing incomprehensible to him in the disdain which a right-minded woman must naturally feel for a man who, while professing to love her, had not the moral courage to renounce a bygone entanglement of which he was weary. And if he himself did not yet occupy quite so high a place in her affections as that man might have occupied, he had at least done nothing to forfeit her respect. Nor was it unreasonable to hope that, as years went on, she might learn to love him with a love which he had hitherto, perhaps, exerted himself too little to earn. Something of this kind he said to her; and her reply was of a nature to satisfy him and to relieve him of all his doubts.

‘I wouldn’t marry you, Edmund,’ she declared, ‘if I didn’t feel sure that I could do my duty and be a good wife to you. We know each other so well that we needn’t be afraid of making any of those dreadful discoveries which often cause unhappiness amongst married people. Only you

mustn't expect me to be always cheerful or to be the same as I was before I lost Micky. I feel as if I had grown old before my time ; you'll have to make the best of an old woman.'

'My dear,' answered Edmund, 'whether you are old or young, cheerful or sad, you will always be yourself. You won't hear me complaining of you, and any slightest wish of yours that I can gratify I will gratify ; that I promise you.'

She knew that he would keep his promise, and she was neither unhappy nor ungrateful, as they walked slowly back towards the house together in the waning light. Gratitude is, indeed, due for the love of any honest gentleman ; and as for happiness, how many people ever obtain it in its supremest form, or, obtaining it, are able to keep their hold upon it ? Winifred was more than reconciled to a destiny which, now that she had unbosomed herself of her secret, she could contemplate without dread or misgiving ; she recognised, too, the chivalrous forbearance of her future hus-

band, who had refrained from demanding more than she was able to give him.

Nevertheless, there must always be a touch of sadness in the certainty that supreme happiness is absolutely unobtainable.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE MINISTERING ANGEL.

CRUISING is, in these days, a very common form of recreation amongst the well-to-do; but probably there are only two classes of persons who can be said to really enjoy it: the keen sailor, who usually contents himself with a small vessel and is seldom to be met with in the Solent or on the west coast of Scotland; and the overworked man, to whom the mere fact of having absolutely nothing to do and no letters to write or receive is in itself sufficient. Billy Bellew belonged to neither category; so that, in spite of fine weather and pleasant company, he found the long summer days a good deal longer than they ought to have been after he had

sailed from Southampton on board his friend's yacht. And this was fortunate; because his one wish was to get through the summer and early autumn with all possible despatch. He had his programme all ready mapped out, and under ordinary circumstances he would have admitted that it was not one to grumble at. So many weeks yachting; so many weeks on the moors, with old Maxwell and other friends from whom he had received invitations; perhaps a little stalking; then, if there should be time enough left, a week or so of cub-hunting; and then—well, then surely it would be permissible to drop a line to Lysaght and hint that Shropshire adjoins Cheshire, in which latter county he had decided to take up his hunting-quarters for the winter. He could not help—for the matter of that, he did not wish to help—being sanguine. He reasoned that, if Winnie had had no idea of ultimately yielding, she would not have been so anxious to send him away; he thought it very natural that in the first freshness of her sorrow she should

shrink from contemplating consolation, and he bore no ill-will against Harry Lysaght for having interfered in the matter. 'I'm such a duffer,' he reflected; 'I don't make any allowance for women's sensibilities; and I dare say, if I had stayed on in London, I should only have succeeded in rubbing them all the wrong way and making them hate the sight of me. I expect I'm best where I am for the present.'

Nevertheless, it was very tedious where he was. The long swell of the lazy Atlantic, the tumbling seas of St. George's Channel, the wild, melancholy beauty of the north Irish coast, the marvellous colouring of the Sound of Jura, and the noise and bustle of tourist-ridden Oban—all these were tedious to him. Not quite so bad, perhaps, as Naples and Florence and Venice; still, wearisome enough. Who cares to sit and look at an interminable succession of dissolving views, while waiting for the verdict which is to determine the whole course of his future life? There were several other men on board. They occupied themselves

principally in playing poker, snoozing over the newspapers and devising ingenious practical jokes for the benefit of Billy, whose spirits, they remarked, required rousing. They were very good fellows in their way—certainly much better company than Colonel Littlewood—and Billy had always liked them. It was not their fault that they had bored him to death now. At Portree one of them, who had received a batch of letters, had a rather interesting piece of intelligence to impart.

‘You know little Lysaght, don’t you, Bellew?’ said he. ‘Going to be married in a few weeks to some girl who lives near him in Shropshire. A Miss Forbes whom he has been wanting to marry for ever so long, it seems; only she wasn’t quite in such a hurry as he was. Looks as if she was rather in a hurry now that she has made up her mind, doesn’t it? Well, she’s a lucky young woman; for Lysaght ain’t half a bad little chap, and he has more money than he can spend. Wedding to be quite private, owing to a recent bereavement in the bride’s family. H’m! I trust that may be taken

as a delicate and kindly intimation that no presents are expected.'

This ungenerous view of the case by no means commended itself to Billy, who forthwith despatched an order to a well-known firm of silversmiths and a letter of warm congratulation to Harry Lysaght, in which he made so bold as to send his kindest remembrances to Winnie, together with the expression of a hope that he might find himself within reach of Stratton Park before the year was out. His letter and his present were gratefully acknowledged in due course; but Harry quite forgot to deliver the kindest remembrances and the accompanying message. How could an excited bridegroom-elect be expected to carry such trivialities in his head?

The incident, however, was of service to Billy, inasmuch as it enabled him to feel himself, for a time, more or less in touch with the Forbes family. Moreover, Harry alluded to shooting prospects in his reply, and mentioned that he fully intended to be home again by the middle of November.

Whether Billy was destined to shoot pheasants in November or not was for some weeks after this a very doubtful question ; but it was quite certain that he would shoot no grouse that year. It may have been at one of the ports in which the yacht lay before he quitted her, or it may have been in Edinburgh, where he spent a night, that he picked up the germs of the sickness which prostrated him immediately after his arrival at Mr. Maxwell's shooting lodge ; either way, it soon became evident that he was in for typhoid fever, and sorely perplexed his host was to know what was to be done with him. The one thing which could assuredly not be done was to move him ; so additional medical assistance and trained nurses were telegraphed for, and the disadvantages of a remote locality had to be contended against as best they might. Mr. Maxwell, a kindly, fussy old gentleman, at first proposed to send for his wife, but yielded to the representations of his other guests, who were convinced that Mrs. Maxwell's health would not stand the strain which it was sought to impose upon her.

As Mrs. Maxwell was a smart lady, who affected to be something of an invalid, and who detested discomfort of any kind, it is more than likely that the other guests were right ; but her husband continued to be very uneasy.

‘ It would be an awful thing if the poor fellow were to die here ! ’ said he. ‘ I don’t half like the responsibility of having a man dangerously ill in the house, with no lady to see whether he is being properly attended to or not.’

Billy, luckily for him, soon became unconscious of all the trouble that he was causing. He was conscious, indeed, of nothing but a prolonged and hideous nightmare, in which his personal identity seemed to have slipped away from him ; so that he could not be sure whether it was he himself or somebody else who was burning and suffering on that narrow bed. But by degrees and at intervals his senses began to return to him, and he became dimly aware that there was somebody strangely resembling Blanche Littlewood who was always at his side. At first he was too weak to do more than

wonder whether it really was Blanche, and, if so, how she came to be there. Sometimes she spoke to him and sometimes he made a faint monosyllabic reply, without having understood what she said; only one day, when there came a sound as of a heavy man approaching on tip-toe, and when presently the ruddy, sympathetic countenance of old Mr. Maxwell was bent over him, he made an effort and asked a few questions.

‘Oh, *you’re* all right, old man,’ Mr. Maxwell said reassuringly, in answer to some of these; ‘you aren’t going up aloft just yet—don’t you flatter yourself! Yes; you’ve had rather a long bout of it, and you’ve been about as bad as you could be; but the doctor pronounced you out of danger nearly a week ago. All you have to do now is to get well and take your time about it. Trouble? nonsense, my dear fellow! you’ve given no trouble to any of us, I can assure you. We’ve been going on shooting and everything, just as usual, ever since that excellent little woman came and insisted upon taking charge of you. Upon my word, I can’t

feel thankful enough to her and — and her husband.'

'Her husband!' repeated Billy feebly. And then, in a dismayed tone, 'Is *he* here, too?'

'Well, yes; he's here. She couldn't very well have come without him, you see, could she? Oh, that's all right; he has liked himself very well here, I think; and of course we were only too glad to have another gun after you were laid on the shelf. Quite a boon to us, in fact.'

'He hasn't shot anybody yet, then?'

'N—no, not exactly. That is, of course not! Why the deuce should he? Now, look here, Bellew; I mustn't let you talk any more, or I shall catch it from Mrs. Littlewood. I'll come in and see you again as soon as she gives me leave, but I'm afraid I have exceeded my time already.'

It may have been because Mr. Maxwell was not desirous of being further interrogated as to Colonel Littlewood's exploits that he left the room so precipitately; but Billy did not need to be told what a dangerous neighbour the Colonel (who had once

been a crack shot) had become of late years, while he knew only too well how dreadfully offensive the Colonel was apt to be after dinner every evening. What a time poor old Maxwell and his friends must have been having of it with the man !

This thought disturbed and distressed him more than the unexplained fact that Mrs. Littlewood had established herself upon the premises, for his brain was not yet in working order, and could not deal with more than one subject at a time. But he was soon enlightened by Blanche herself, who told him how, by the happiest accident, she and Alfred had been staying with some people a few miles away when the news of his illness had reached them ; how she had at once implored Mr. Maxwell to entrust the patient to her care, and how she had occupied her present post of responsibility for more than a month. She spoke of it all as a matter of course ; her voice was subdued and soothing ; she was arrayed in a garb appropriate to the circumstances, and she made arrangements and gave instructions as coolly as if she had been his wife or

his sister. She seemed to have clean forgotten that they had not parted precisely on terms of amity.

Billy himself had half forgotten what the actual state of affairs was, and had only a confused impression that Fortune had, somehow or other, played him a scurvy trick. By degrees, however, he began to realise what that trick had been and what its consequences were likely to be. Blanche Littlewood, for reasons best known to herself, had not only pardoned him, but had laid him under an obligation which he could not, without the basest ingratitude, ignore. If, in return, she should claim once more the fealty which he had vowed to her in years gone by, could he have the heart to meet her with a renewed declaration of independence? Would he, if she should demand it, be bound in honour to renounce, at her bidding, the woman whom he loved? These were hard questions, and he debated them inwardly for many days, without saying a word about them. But when at length he was able to leave his bed for a few hours

together, and when, one afternoon, he was half sitting, half reclining, before the fire, with Blanche, who had been reading a novel aloud, opposite to him, the time seemed to have come for them to arrive at some sort of an understanding. He opened the proceedings by inquiring what had become of Captain Patten.

‘Captain Patten,’ replied Blanche serenely, ‘has vanished into infinite space. He was a worthy and useful creature in some ways; but I don’t think I ever met anyone who had a clearer conviction of the necessity of taking care of himself, and I rather suspect that Alfred frightened him. Alfred, as you may be aware, has a tiresome habit of asking his friends to oblige him with small loans, and the consequence is that some of them cease to be his friends rather suddenly. Captain Patten ceased quite suddenly, and I hadn’t the curiosity to inquire why he had departed or where he had gone.’ She added presently, in a tone of mild reproach: ‘I think you might have known better than to be jealous of Captain Patten.’

‘But I never was jealous of him,’ Billy protested. ‘I never thought of such a thing. It wasn’t on that account, you know, that we parted in Venice.’

‘Wasn’t it? Well, perhaps I was the jealous one, then. At all events, we were both of us angry, and we quarrelled, and now we must try to forget that we ever quarrelled. That is always the best plan, isn’t it?’

‘I dare say it is, as a general rule; only I wanted to explain that I had no more intention of quarrelling with you then than I have now. And I think I ought to say, too, that I haven’t changed in any way since then—not in *any* way.’

Mrs. Littlewood declined to understand him. ‘Indeed, you have changed very much, my poor Billy!’ she returned, laughing. ‘Shall I fetch a looking-glass for you? You will want one soon, when you shave off that black beard, which really must come off. I insist upon it!’

He gave in for the time being, promising himself that he would be more explicit upon some future

occasion ; but that future occasion never came. She was wonderfully skilful in staving it off whenever it seemed to be at hand ; she made no allusion to the Forbeses, nor would she take any notice of his own tentative allusions. Her manner had also undergone a complete and perplexing alteration. Instead of being peevish and exacting, as of yore, she was always cheerful, always patient, always on the watch to supply those numberless small needs which an invalid experiences, but scarcely cares to mention. She treated him as if he belonged to her ; yet she said never a word of love, nor did she seem to expect that he should do so.

Thus day succeeded day until Mr. Maxwell's engagements compelled him to leave the Highlands. It was not yet thought expedient for Billy to travel, and the old gentleman entreated him to remain where he was until he should be quite convalescent, adding :

‘I know I am leaving you in good hands ; for Colonel and Mrs. Littlewood have most kindly promised to stay and take care of you. There

really seem to be no limits to Mrs. Littlewood's kindness.'

There really seemed to be none ; and the dreadful part of it was that her kindness was going to be rewarded, if not with ingratitude, with something which might only too probably represent itself to her under that aspect. The last week of Billy's sojourn in Aberdeenshire was less pleasant than those immediately preceding it had been. He was able to take his meals downstairs now, able to go out for drives and short walks, able also to renew intercourse with the Colonel, who welcomed him boisterously, borrowed a hundred pounds of him and waxed uproarious over Mr. Maxwell's whisky. It was quite clear that the Colonel must not be allowed to go on scandalising the servants any longer ; it was quite clear, too, that Billy had no further excuse for trespassing upon the hospitality of the absent owner.

He said as much one fine, frosty October morning to Mrs. Littlewood, who at once agreed with him. They would all travel South together as far as

York, she said ; after which she and her husband would proceed to London, while Billy could carry out the intention which he had previously expressed of betaking himself to the Midlands, in order to inspect his hunters. She was so reasonable and, as he could not help feeling, so generous that he was quite unable to find any adequate words in which to thank her. For the rest, she declared that she desired no thanks ; he had already conferred the greatest boon upon her that he had it in his power to confer by getting well.

‘ I haven’t so many friends in the world that I can afford to lose the best of them,’ she added.

Well, she should, at least, never lose his friendship ; he was determined of that. Not even to please Winifred herself would he turn his back upon the woman who had tended him with such untiring devotion and had dealt with him in so merciful and magnanimous a spirit. But Winifred, he felt sure, would ask no such sacrifice of him. Winifred, who was herself merciful and magnanimous, would undoubtedly admit, when once the

facts should have been related to her, that he could not possibly consent to it. She might not approve of everything in Mrs. Littlewood's past conduct; she might not, just at first, feel very amicably disposed towards her; but she would certainly acknowledge what everyone must needs acknowledge; and in time, perhaps, he would have the happiness of seeing Winifred and Blanche fast friends. The poor fellow actually believed that that was possible. It was, therefore, not in the least surprising that he should have believed, as he did, in the ultimate success of his suit. Apparently Blanche did not mean to oppose it, and he had regarded Edmund Kirby all along as a *quantité négligeable*.

In this fools' paradise he lived contentedly enough for some little time, while his strength slowly came back to him, and while he made arrangements for the transfer of his horses into Cheshire. Some friends of his who resided in the latter county (indeed, there was scarcely a county in England which did not contain some friends of

Billy Bellew's) invited him to go to them for the opening meet of the season and stay until the modest mansion which he had hired in their neighbourhood should be quite ready for his reception. Having accepted their invitation, he betook himself to London to make some necessary purchases, and, of course, to pay his respects in Lowndes Street. But Mrs. Littlewood was not at home when he called, and he learnt from her husband, who greeted him with affectionate cordiality, that she had left town for a few weeks.

'Come and dine to-morrow evening, old chap,' the hospitable Colonel said, 'and meet one or two other fellows. The wife's off paying visits at country houses, and I'm *en garson* for a bit. Fact of the matter is, I'm not so keen about staying in places where there's shooting as I once was. My eyesight isn't what it used to be, and people are apt to be beastly uncivil nowadays if you happen to be out of form. That old beggar Maxwell got into no end of a stew one day in Scotland because a man had his legs peppered. I don't believe I was the

culprit at all, but he swore I was, and he was uncommon nasty about it, I can tell you. I don't care,' the Colonel added, drawing himself up with dignity and twirling his moustache, 'to expose myself to that kind of thing, you know.'

Billy declined the dinner, pleading that he was still obliged to be very careful in the matter of diet and early hours. He said he was extremely sorry to have missed Mrs. Littlewood, and he really was sorry. Yet it cannot be truthfully asserted that he was overjoyed when, on reaching his destination in Cheshire a few days later, he found her established in the house as one of his fellow-guests. He had not at all expected to meet her there, he would fain have avoided telling her that he meditated a speedy excursion into the adjoining county, and he was vexed to hear from his hostess that she had invited herself. That lady availed herself of the privilege of old acquaintanceship to speak with perfect candour upon the subject.

'For the last two years,' said she, 'I haven't asked Blanche Littlewood to stay with us, and I

dare say you know why I haven't. Of course it was good of her to nurse you when you were ill ; but I confess that I was sorry and disappointed when I was told of what she had done, for I quite hoped that there had been an amicable rupture between you. Unfortunately, I know you too well to have the faintest hope of your attempting to emancipate yourself now that, as you so absurdly affirm, she has saved your life, but I wish you would give her a gentle hint that I can't let her make use of me in this way a second time. To put things in brutally plain language, I don't wish the house to get a bad name.'

It was all very well for Billy to protest indignantly against language which he declared to be totally unjustifiable as well as brutal, but he could not deny that Mrs. Littlewood had probably come down to Cheshire for the express purpose of staying under the same roof with him ; nor did Mrs. Littlewood herself deny it when they met. The moment that he saw her his heart sank, for he perceived at once that she had reverted to her former self. The

powder, the rouge, the darkened eyelids, the fashionably-cut but somewhat exaggerated costume—all those features which in far Aberdeenshire had been so delightfully conspicuous by their absence, were now to the fore again, as was also, alas! the old air of triumphant proprietorship and defiant indifference to the world's opinion. After dinner, she beckoned him away from the rest of the company into the library, where she threw herself down upon a sofa, and, making him sit beside her, asked him whether he didn't think it very nice of her to have arranged this little surprise for him.

He was troubled and annoyed; his nerves, perhaps, had been rendered sensitive by his illness; and before he could check himself he answered sharply:

'No; I don't think it nice at all. I wish to Heaven you wouldn't do such things!'

She raised her eyebrows.

'That means?' said she interrogatively.

'It only means that I can't see the use of it. It does you a lot of harm, it makes people say things

which aren't true, but which can't be contradicted, and—and it places me in a horribly false position.'

'Oh—a false position?'

'Yes; because it gives me the appearance of being something more than I want to be, and what I hope I always shall be—your friend.'

'You used to wish to be something more,' Mrs. Littlewood remarked.

Billy looked down. By the sound of her voice he knew that the interview was not going to be a pleasant one; but it was unavoidable, and the best plan was to clear away ambiguity once for all.

'I thought,' said he, 'that we had agreed in Venice to close that chapter. Can't we close it and be friends? After what I told you then—and when I was ill I told you again, you know, that I hadn't changed in any way—you must see that there is nothing else to be done. You must see that if I wished it ever so much, I couldn't go back and be what I was last year or the year before.'

But that was just what Mrs. Littlewood did not see. She said that love, if it were in any sense

worthy of being called by that name, was eternal ; she believed and was sure that Billy had once loved her ; she would not and could not believe that he was really a traitor. For her own part, she could pardon anything and everything to one whom she loved. Certainly she had been angered and hurt by that fancy of his for Miss Forbes, but she had known all along that it was only a passing fancy and that he would return to her in the end. As matters had fallen out, it was she who had returned to him, and perhaps that had been foolish of her ; but could she have left him to die ? Warming with her theme, she became really eloquent. She pointed out, what was true enough, that it was she, and she alone, who had suffered in social esteem through their intimacy ; that she had not hesitated to brave the comments of malicious tongues when she had flown to his sick-bed ; and that, although she did not grudge one of the sacrifices which she had made for his sake, it was nothing short of an insult to talk to her of friendship now.

Billy groaned. He was very remorseful—a great

deal more remorseful than he had any need to be — yet what could he do? As he had said, he could not go back and be what he had once been.

‘It’s best to tell you the truth, Blanche,’ he burst out. ‘God knows I’m not ungrateful to you, but you would only think me a humbug if I tried to explain how I feel about it all. The truth is that I am going to marry Winifred Forbes, if she will have me; and as soon as I can, I shall make my way into Shropshire and ask her again. That’s why I came to this part of the world.’

Mrs. Littlewood stared at him for a moment, and then, to his amazement, broke out into a loud laugh.

‘Do you mean to say that you haven’t heard, then?’ she ejaculated.

‘Heard what?’ asked Billy.

‘Why, that the girl is upon the point of being married to her old flame? Indeed, I’m not at all sure that she isn’t actually married now. The wedding was to be to-day or to-morrow, I know.

Who but you would have waited tranquilly all this time until it quite suited your convenience to throw the handkerchief, never doubting that the young woman would likewise sit patiently in a corner awaiting your pleasure? I thought, of course, that you had given up all idea of espousing her, though you might still be cherishing some sentimental regrets.'

Never has such a thing been heard of as that a man of Billy Bellew's strength and stature should faint away on receiving a startling piece of intelligence; even delicate ladies have, in the latter part of the present century, wholly abandoned the practice. But Billy was hardly out of the convalescent stage yet, and so for a few seconds he felt that pause of the heart, that cold moisture of the brow and that deathly sickness which are the usual precursors of unconsciousness.

'Is this true? Do you *know* that it is true?' he gasped out hoarsely.

'Dear me, yes! I heard all about it from Mrs. Ryland weeks ago, and there are half a dozen

people in the house now who can convince you, if you are sceptical. It seems that the man—Kirby, isn't his name?—succeeded to a property the other day, and the Forbeses certainly don't appear to have lost time in calling upon him to redeem his promise. Perhaps you will excuse me from condoling with you. All prejudice apart, I must say that I think you have had a lucky escape.'

Then all of a sudden she changed her tone, and, laying her hand upon his coat-sleeve, murmured:

'Don't be angry with me! I'm not angry with you, though some people might think I had a right to be. Haven't I told you that I can forgive until seventy times seven?'

But Billy could make no answer.

He rose abruptly and staggered towards the door, making uncertain clutches at the furniture as he went. It was soon known that he had been taken ill and had been obliged to go to bed; but his servant, who had received instructions to admit

nobody into his room, assured Mrs. Littlewood and other anxious inquirers that the indisposition was merely temporary and that his master intended to hunt on the morrow, as had been arranged.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BILLY MAKES HIS ESCAPE.

It was not very much sleep that Billy Bellew obtained that night. When he reached his bedroom he felt quite sufficiently ill and exhausted to go to bed, and he did so; but he was far too broad awake to remain there; so, as soon as his man had left him, he rose, put on a smoking-suit, dropped into an armchair before the fire, and sat for a long time staring vacantly at the glowing coals.

At first he could not put any order into his thoughts; the one fact that Winifred was lost to him for ever was all that he could realise. But by degrees many things became clear to him, and he wondered at the fatuity which had hitherto

blinded him to what was so patent. How had he ever been insane enough to believe that Winifred would consent to be his wife? He had misunderstood her as completely as he had misunderstood Blanche Littlewood—only in an opposite sense. The woman whom he loved had offered him friendship; the woman whose friendship he would gladly have retained claimed love from him, and would take nothing less. It could not have been otherwise. They had obeyed their respective natures and had acted as they were quite certain to act, under given circumstances. It was easy to understand that Winifred, whether she loved Kirby or not, would never allow herself to play the man false to whom she had plighted her troth. And most likely she would be happy with Kirby, even though she might not be actually in love with him.

‘She thinks so much more of other people’s happiness than she does of her own,’ sighed Billy, ‘that, so long as he is contented, she won’t ask for anything else. She is like that—one or two people in the world are like that, I suppose.’

He himself, little as he suspected it, was not so very unlike that, and it was chiefly his unselfishness that saved him from giving way to despair. Winifred had chosen her destiny, and would not be dissatisfied with it: that was something. It was something, too, that Blanche, to whom he owed so much, and from whom he could not desire to be permanently alienated, would now have things as she wished to have them. All would go on as heretofore, he supposed. He would continue to be more or less at her beck and call. He would continue to subsidize the accommodating Colonel, and she would continue to be ostracised by those who deemed it incumbent upon them to discountenance such irregularities. After all, what did it signify? Very little indeed to him, and presumably still less to her, since she had never winced at gossip as he had done. For the rest, he contemplated the present and the future from something of a fatalistic standpoint. Both were the logical and inevitable outcome of the past. To use language which is somewhat out of date, but which may be

none the worse on that account, he had done wrong and had got to suffer for it. Because it cannot be right to make love to your neighbour's wife, even though your love-making be confined to verbal expressions, and even though, upon more mature consideration, you should discover that you have never been in love with her at all.

It was not until nearly two o'clock in the morning that a terrible idea suddenly presented itself to this belated seeker after truth and resignation. What if the Colonel were to die? The contingency was neither a fanciful nor a remote one. A middle-aged man, with a short neck and a red face, who had led a thoroughly unhealthy life for many years, might apply in vain to any insurance company, and, supposing that Mrs. Littlewood should be left a widow, would it not become Billy Bellew's bounden duty to make that reparation to her which she would unquestionably expect? Every argument that she had employed to show that his proffered friendship was an insult to her now would apply with double force then; there was no getting out of

the fact that he had compromised her, and it was difficult to see how there could be any honourable getting out of his obligation to marry her, when and if she should be released from her present bondage. All the same, he could hardly bring himself to face the thought. Eventually he might have to face it; but not now—surely not now, while his wounds were still fresh and bleeding!

‘I hope to God I may die first myself, that’s all!’ muttered poor Billy as he returned to his bed. ‘It isn’t so very unlikely, when you come to think of it. I’ve had plenty of narrow shaves before now, and I shall have plenty more—riding the animals that I do. And there’s no better death than breaking your neck over a fence while hounds are running.’

He slept a little after this, and when he made his appearance at the breakfast-table some hours later, he was able to respond cheerily to the many queries showered upon him with respect to his health.

Now, if Billy had desired to break his neck that very day, he could not have made choice of a more

promising and capable accomplice than his chestnut mare the Shrew, whom he had selected to carry him. His host shook his head when he saw her, and said :

‘I wish you would sell that brute, Bellew; she isn’t safe to ride—I don’t care how good a man she has on her back.’

‘Oh, she’s all right with me,’ answered Billy. ‘As for selling her, I don’t suppose I could get a ten-pound note for her. Besides which, I shouldn’t like to be a murderer.’

He had bought her for a song, by reason of her evil reputation, and had won half a dozen steeple-chases with her, though he had seldom hunted her. She was a magnificently made mare, with marvellous speed, endurance and jumping power, but so violent and excitable that nine men out of ten would have pronounced her useless with hounds. Moreover, she was afflicted with a temper which was easily roused, and which, when roused, displayed itself in every form that equine ingenuity can compass. Billy had somehow or other contrived to get on

terms with her. He always rode her in a plain snaffle, and was wont to affirm that, so long as she was not interfered with, she was the safest mare in England. Still, she was hardly the animal to take to an opening meet, when the whole countryside had turned out in force, and when every road and lane was blocked with vehicles. He had to keep clear of the throng; and, under the circumstances, he was not sorry to have so good an excuse for deserting the ladies.

The hounds were not long in finding, and, although Billy got away under considerable disadvantages, he was soon with them. The mare, of course, bolted. That was what she always did; and it would have been not only impossible to hold her, but very unwise to attempt it. Her rider sat down in his saddle and began to enjoy himself. He knew that she was no fool; he knew that she would steady down after the first burst; and meanwhile it was glorious to feel that, in spite of all, life still had its happy moments. The Shrew, too, was enjoying herself. The country was rather a stiff

one; but nothing seemed to come amiss to her, and she sailed on, taking her fences in perfect style, and finally clearing, without an effort, a brook which reduced the field to a very select few.

But shortly after this a thing happened to her and to her rider which had never happened before since they had arrived at a mutual understanding. How it came to pass Billy could not have explained. Certainly the hedge looked big, black and ragged, and the take-off was bad, and she was going at racing speed; yet it was madness to attempt to steady her, and he did so quite involuntarily. The moment that he realised his mistake he dropped his hands; but it was too late. The mare threw up her head, whipped round, and they were within an ace of parting company. The incident in itself was not of very great importance, for he got her through a gap presently, and was even able to make up his lost ground, but to Billy it was pregnant with the saddest significance.

‘It has come at last,’ he muttered to himself; ‘my nerve is going. I’ll never hunt again if I can’t

go straight ; and if I have to give up hunting, God help me !'

This much was, at all events, certain, that he had seen the best of his first day's hunting that season. The mare's temper was upset ; she could not or would not forget that he had touched her mouth once ; she began to rush madly at her fences ; she made several bad blunders ; and he was glad enough when a brilliant but comparatively brief run was terminated by a kill in the open. For the first time in his life he found himself almost wishing that the next covert might be drawn blank.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Littlewood and her hostess had been trying to see something of the run on wheels, and had been quite unsuccessful. Indeed, a heavy barouche is not a conveyance very well adapted for that purpose, which was doubtless one reason why they had been left in undisputed possession of it. On the other hand, the opportunity thus afforded of administering a well-meant and kindly lecture was not to be neglected by a lady who had once

been on terms of greater intimacy with Mrs. Littlewood than she was now. So she talked at considerable length, and said some very sensible things, not one of which produced the faintest impression upon her companion.

‘If you were Mrs. Grundy in person you could not be more convincing,’ Blanche wound up a protracted discussion by saying; ‘but, you see, the truth is that Mrs. Grundy and I fell out some years ago, and I couldn’t propitiate her now, if I tried. Therefore I am not going to try; nor is Billy. It may be very sad, but it is a fact that we don’t care.’

‘Well, I can say no more,’ returned the other, out of patience. ‘I think you are—— But perhaps I had better not tell you what I think you are, and perhaps we had better turn towards home. We have seen the last of the hunt for to-day, I expect.’

As a matter of fact, they were nearer than she supposed to the hounds, who by this time had started a second fox and had run him some

distance; but it so chanced that, owing to the lie of the land and the set of the wind, the first intimation of their vicinity that reached her ears was the sound of a galloping horse's hoofs upon the road behind her. She turned round and recognised her husband, who at once signalled to her to stop the carriage.

'Good heavens, George!' she exclaimed when he drew near, 'what has happened? You are as pale as death. Has there been an accident?'

'Yes,' he answered hurriedly, 'Bellew has had a bad fall. I want the carriage, if you don't mind. You won't have a very long walk home if you cut across the fields.'

He would not return any definite answer to the agitated questions with which the two ladies plied him, but he was very urgent that they should start on their walk immediately, and all the time that they were interrogating him, he kept glancing over his shoulder. At length he jumped off his horse, took his wife by the arm and drew her aside.

‘For God’s sake get that woman away!’ he whispered. ‘They are carrying him down the road, and she mustn’t see him. She can do no good; nor can you.’

‘Oh, George! — do you mean that he is dead?’

‘He has broken his neck. He put that brute of a mare of his at a gate, and she breasted it—never tried to rise. I suppose he must have pitched on his chin. Oh, poor dear old Billy! to think that it should have ended like this!’

It was, at least, as we know, the end which he would have chosen; and nobody can know whether, if his life had been prolonged for a few more years, he would have been able to dispose of it according to his choice or not. While the husband and wife were still whispering together, Mrs. Littlewood joined them.

‘You need not trouble to make any mystery about it,’ she said quietly; ‘I know he has been killed. If he had only been badly hurt, you would have told me so. Don’t think about me, please; I

shall not get in your way, and I have no title to be considered, you know.'

Then she sank down upon the bank by the roadside and sat—with her elbows on her knees, and her chin supported by her clasped hands—a pathetic picture of blank despair, in her fine clothes and the unaltered juvenile bloom of her drawn cheeks.

Soon a slowly-moving procession came in sight. Six members of the hunt were carrying the dead man, whose white face, upturned to the sky, had not been covered and bore no disfiguring marks. His colourless lips were curved into a faint smile. They lifted him, with some difficulty, into the carriage, and then fell back. One or two of them were completely and undisguisedly overcome; every one of them was deeply moved, for all Billy Bellew's acquaintances had been his friends. But Mrs. Littlewood watched them in silence and with dry eyes. There was no good in crying; there never would be any good in crying again. Tears had been of service to her on many and many a

past occasion, but the man who had been distressed and moulded to her will by them had passed for ever beyond the reach of such influences. Her calamity was as irremediable as it was cruel. Vain had been her sacrifices; for she had made real and great sacrifices, though they had been unsolicited by him: she had lost caste permanently, and she had gained nothing—absolutely nothing, not even poor Billy's love. It does not seem likely that anyone who has read this record of a part of Mrs. Littlewood's life will feel much pity for her; yet it may be acknowledged that she was punished in proportion to her offences.

At that same hour the bells of the parish church at Stratton were ringing merrily in honour of a very unostentatious wedding which had just taken place. The bride and bridegroom had already driven away, and had been followed by most of those few near relations who had witnessed the ceremony. Mr. and Mrs. Lysaght, whose own orange-blossoms had hardly faded as yet, were about to step into their brougham when the former said:

‘Well, I’m glad that’s over! Between you and me, I was a little bit nervous, for I wasn’t sure how she would get through it. I knew she would have to walk past poor little Micky’s grave, you see.’

‘You needn’t have been alarmed,’ Daisy answered, ‘nothing would ever make Winnie break down. Besides, I believe she is perfectly contented—though *why* she should be contented, Heaven alone knows!’

‘That was a queer business about her and Bellew,’ Harry remarked musingly; ‘I should never have believed it if you hadn’t told me. One would have said they were the last couple in the world to take a fancy to one another. And you think she really did care for him?’

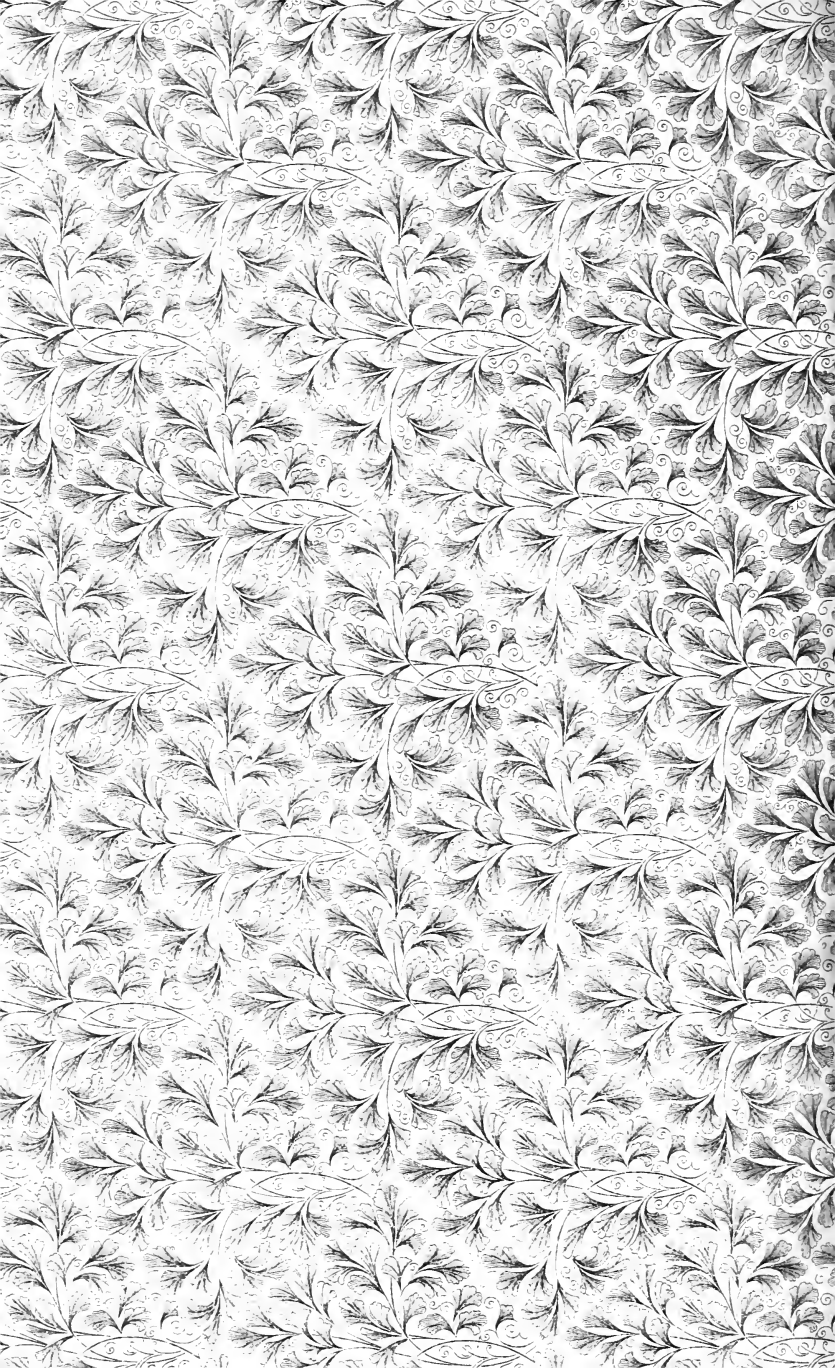
‘I thought so; I am not sure that I think so. Winnie has always been incomprehensible to me, and always will be, I suppose. Most likely that is because I am too much of a sinner to enter into the sensations of a saint.’

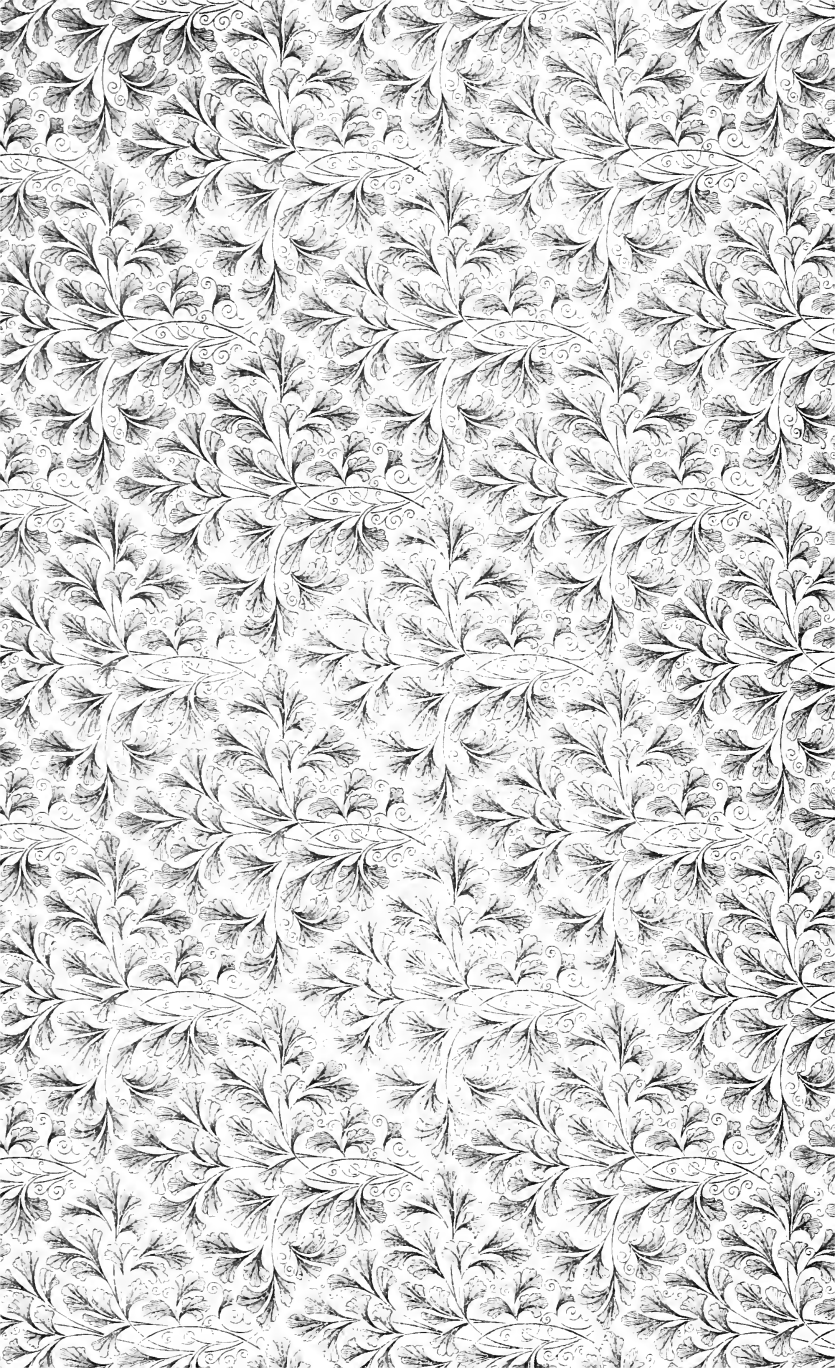
‘Such as you are, you are good enough for me,’ said Harry complacently.

‘I flatter myself that I am. But Edmund Kirby isn’t good enough for Winnie, and if you are wasting sympathy upon her, as I can see that you are, you may take comfort from the thought that Mr. Bellew wouldn’t have been good enough for her either.’

THE END.







UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA



3 0112 052948707